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## Architectures of the Veil: The Representation of the Veil and Zenanas in Pakistani Feminists' Texts

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

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**ARCHITECTURES OF THE VEIL: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE VEIL AND  
ZENANAS IN PAKISTANI FEMINISTS' TEXTS**

(Spine title: ARCHITECTURES OF THE VEIL)

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Amber Fatima Riaz

Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO  
School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

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**Amber Fatima Riaz**

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## Abstract

My dissertation, which works at the intersections of feminist theory, architectural theory and postcolonial literary theory, examines the spatiality of the zenana and the burqa as represented in Pakistani literary and cultural texts. I propose that the burqa creates a portable closet, an interstitial, liminal, “third space” that allows Pakistani (secluded and veiled) women to not only traverse the borders between the private (female, domestic) and public (male) spaces, but to also signal chastity and religiosity while in the public, and semi-public spaces of the cities and villages of Pakistan. I argue that the dupatta, the chador and the hijab (different types of the veil) function in a manner similar to the burqa and the zenana, even though the veils do not enclose or restrict the woman’s body in the same way. I focus on General Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization of Pakistan’s constitution (1977-1988) and examine the impact of specific laws on women’s mobility in the decade following Zia’s death (1988-1999) as represented in literary and cultural texts. I examine Tehmina Durrani’s *Blasphemy* (1996), Maniza Naqvi’s *Mass Transit* (1998), Shahid Nadeem’s PTV drama serial *Neelay Haath* (1989), Sheema Kermani’s music video “Aseer Shahzadi” [Imprisoned Princess] (2002) and Shahid Nadeem’s theatrical farce “Burqavaganza” to show that the enclosures created by the segregation system are paradoxical spaces that are both restrictive and imprisoning but also comforting at the same time. The complex relationship of these authors and artists with the veiling and segregation system highlights the conundrum that most Pakistani feminists face: any challenge to the veiling and segregation system in Pakistan is seen as a questioning of Islam, and hence blasphemous. It also shows that a complete abolition of the veiling system may not even be desired, for the system is used consistently by Pakistani women to win concessions from a patriarchal state.

### **Keywords**

Islamic Veil, Muslim Feminism, Veil, Pakistan Literature, Tehmina Durrani, Maniza Naqvi, Shahid Nadeem, Sheema Kermani, Islamization of Pakistan, Haddood Ordinance, Luce Irigaray, Homi Bhabha, Interstitial Space, Third Space, Portable Closet

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Dedication

To

Azeem, Aleena and Aasir

Without you, my life would have been without sunshine  
I love you with all my heart

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## Introduction

### The Portable Closet: Pakistani Feminism's paradoxical relationship with the Muslim Veil

“No item of female apparel summons more attention, animosity, debate or censure in Western society than the veil covering Muslim women. That's saying something in a culture inured to the sight of sweatpants with 'Juicy' on the backside, Abercrombie & Fitch's padded 'push-up' swimsuit tops for eight-year-old girls, and women teetering on skyscraper porno heels” (Anne Kingston)

#### 1.1 Introduction

In her 2012 article entitled “Veils: Who Are we to Judge?” published in *Macleans* (n. pag.), Anne Kingston addresses the complex reactions elicited by the sight of a veiled Muslim woman on North American and European city-streets, and links those reactions to a specifically cultural (American) investment in individual liberties, rights and freedoms, due to which the Muslim veil is seen as an item of clothing that curtails those individual rights and freedoms of expression. When women like Katherine Bullock (who converted to Islam in 1994) claim that they wear the veil because it is required by their religion, the unquestioned acceptance of communal/religious norms is seen as evidence of capitulation and surrender (Kingston). As Amira el-Azhary Sonbol shows in her essay “Rethinking Women and Islam”, Muslim women have been viewed

as victims of a patriarchal order defined by Islamic laws, traditions and practices.

According to this perception, while modern states allowed them to emerge from seclusion to participate in society through education and employment, history shackled them with deeply entrenched social habits that hold back reforms designed to allow women greater freedoms and rights. (108)

Sonbol discusses the three main streams of scholarship surrounding debates about the status of women in Islam, of which the (non)wearing of a veil is an integral part. According to her, scholars tend to view Muslim women's history as one that was dominated by seclusion in harems, treatment as property to be bartered, and as silent, unresisting bearers of family values (Sonbol 108). Some scholars, on the other hand, propose that Islam improved the condition of women, and that it guaranteed rights and freedoms to women that were denied to them prior to the advent of Islam (Sonbol 108-109). A third stream tends to view pre-Islamic Arabic tribal systems as more advanced, asserting that women had "greater freedom and rights before the coming of Islam" (Sonbol 109). In all three depictions of Muslim women's history, as well as during current debates about the wearing of the veil, however, Muslim women are portrayed as silent, unresisting, and acquiescent.

The Muslim veil—symbolized by the Afghani burqa in the decade following the 9/11 attacks<sup>1</sup>—has been critiqued and defended in public forums (on news media, in political parliaments) and the "plight" of Muslim women in autocratic regimes in the Middle-East has been a rallying cry for feminists in North America and Europe, who consistently use their perceptions of their own liberation from male "tyranny" to rally for "liberation" of their disadvantaged sisters. Saadia Toor calls this invocation of the "very real plight of Afghan women under the Taliban", for example, a "contemporary version of 'imperial feminism'" ("Muslim Women" 167),<sup>2</sup> in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, an invocation that was used to

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<sup>1</sup> According to Saadia Toor, "the most familiar media image during this period [the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks] became the *burqa*-clad Afghan (read: Muslim) woman" ("Muslim Women" 167).

<sup>2</sup> "Imperial feminism" is a term that is used by scholars to refer to the ideological roots of the colonial enterprise of the nineteenth century, summarized by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) as "white men saving brown women from brown men" (296)

justify the attack on Afghanistan by the Bush administration. In this specific formulation, the “*burqa* itself became a symbol of Islam’s attitude towards women” (Toor “Muslim Women” 167), an attitude that was constructed as singularly oppressive. “Islam” and “Muslim woman”, along with “Muslim veil” become monolithic categories that highlight “Islam’s” misogyny (Toor “Muslim Women” 167). Women who wear the veil, however, express a level of defiance that significantly undermines the construction of the silent, oppressed Muslim woman stereotype (Kingston). In these debates, the Muslim veil, in its various manifestations, is consistently compared to a garment, one that can, and should, be taken off or on, much like a shirt or a shawl.<sup>3</sup> Even those who defend the veil itself, defend it purely as a garment that represents their choice to proclaim their religiosity, and their identification with Islam, to the world. It remains a symbol—of oppression on one hand, and of liberation and rebellion on the other—one that is debated about and contested consistently. What is missing in these debates, however, is the understanding of both the veil’s complex historical evolution, and the differences of perception, application and use across different geographical regions.

Instead of thinking about the veil as a garment that can, or should, be taken off at will, I argue in this dissertation that the veil itself is a symbol of complex social and culturally ingrained systems that cannot be rejected—or accepted—unequivocally. In order to

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<sup>3</sup> I refer, here, to specific political debates that occurred in the Canadian parliament in the past few years, which led to the proposal of, and legislation of Bill 094 in Quebec, that allows a refusal of service by government employees to women who have their faces covered (Andrew Chung *Toronto Star*, March 25 2010). Another new law, passed on 12 December 2011, by the Immigration Minister, Jason Kenney, bans the covering of a face while taking the citizenship oath in Canada (“Citizenship Veil Ban” *Toronto Star* December 12, 2011). In both instances, lawmakers insist that they are in favour of the head covering and of the woman’s right to wear the veil, but assert that the face covering (the niqab) contradicts essential Canadian values of equality and of freedom.

complicate the monolithic constructions of “Islam”, “Muslim woman” and “Muslim veil”, I focus on a specific Muslim country—Pakistan. Given Pakistan’s location—it shares a significant length of its Western border with Afghanistan—and the increasing international (American) pressure on the country to crack down on “extremist terror elements” (Taliban, Al-Qaeda), the country is at a socio-political cross-roads, exemplified by the continuing disagreements between “secular” feminists and “Islamic” feminists.<sup>4</sup> I focus on two decades in Pakistan’s history—the decade under General Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime (1977-1989) during which Islam became the rallying cry for the military dictator (Zia) to legitimize his own rule, and the one that followed Zia’s death (1990-1999). I have chosen to analyze different texts from a range of genres—novels, television plays, and theatrical productions—in order to show that the veil itself (albeit left unchallenged on a large part by Pakistani feminists) functions as a complex metaphor in literary and cultural texts by feminist artists and writers. I show that the veiling and segregation system in Pakistan (as depicted in the texts by Pakistani feminists) is a complex system that manifests itself through multiple veils, architectural features (like latticed windows, veiled doorways, small walls) and systematic and institutionalized segregation principles (separate seats for women on public buses, for example) to restrict and control women’s interactions with both urban and rural spaces. Where architectural features and veils (like the burqa) define women’s mobility and conceal their bodies, institutionalized segregation in the form of separate spaces on public transit (for example) seeks to establish zenana-like spaces in the public arena while simultaneously

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<sup>4</sup> See Amina Jamal’s essay “Transnational Feminism as Critical Practice” in *Meridians*. Jamal situates feminist debates within Pakistan, as well as those emerging from the “West” in the interstices of “traditional” and “modernized” societies, and calls for nuanced accounts of relationships between women, Islam and the modern state. I will discuss these issues in detail in my first chapter.

enabling women's mobility, and facilitating women's (regulated) participation in the labour market in specific ways. My study of literary and cultural texts shows that women have consistently used the principles of segregation (the veil in its multiple manifestations) to both challenge the segregation system (and patriarchal control over their lives) as well as to signal chastity and virtue when in the public space to win particular concessions and freedoms from patriarchy. A thorough understanding of Pakistani feminists' paradoxical relationship with the veil—exemplified by the consistent attempts to negotiate between patriarchal (ab)use of the segregation system and women's own attempts to utilize the veil to gain concessions from patriarchy in terms of access to education, jobs and other amenities—will help nuance the understanding of the “chador aur chardewari” [the veil and the home] system in Pakistan. General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship brought about significant changes in the social and legal fabric of Pakistan—and had a specific impact on women's lives, both during and after the socio-legal changes, details of which I will examine in my first, historically oriented chapter.

## 1.2 “Chador aur chardewari”: Veiling and Segregation in Pakistan

In this dissertation, I show that Pakistani texts by feminists and activists have a paradoxical relationship with the Islamic injunction for veiling, which requires all Muslims<sup>5</sup> to veil themselves in specific ways. The Quranic text, which is the foundational text for the Muslim belief system, mentions the veil in three separate sections, which have subsequently been used to justify the different veiling and segregation systems in Muslim countries and

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<sup>5</sup> Pakistani Muslim feminist scholars like Amina Jamal, Anita Weiss and Rafia Hasan have pointed out that Islam has enjoined modesty for both men and women, asking men to cover their bodies and to lower their eyes in the presence of women while also asking women to act modestly in the presence of men.

communities. In Surah (Chapter) 24, “Light” the Quran instructs “Believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms” (24: 31). The next Ayahs (lines) then list men to whom women can show their adornments. In Surah 33, “The Clans” the veil is mentioned twice and in both instances, it is called hijab, or curtain. In the first instance, followers of the Prophet Mohammad are instructed to be mindful of the Prophet’s and his wives’ privacy, and to not walk into His dwelling without permission. If followers wish to speak to the Prophet’s wives, they must do so from behind a curtain: hijab (33: 53). In Ayah 59 of the same Surah, the wives of the Prophet are instructed to “draw their cloaks close around them (when they go abroad). That will be better, that so they may be recognized and not annoyed”. Since all three verses require a form of modesty, and a veil between men and women, the (much debated about) injunctions have been interpreted to mean either complete seclusion (as in, speak to the wives of the Prophet from behind a curtain) or a form of cloak or veil covering the body of a woman when she is in public. Fadwa El-Guindi, in her ethnographic study of the veil in her book *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* shows that “neither in the *Qu’ran* nor in a reliable *Hadith*<sup>6</sup> can be found any explicit ordinance promulgated by the Prophet Muhammad ordering either Muslim women in general or his own wives to veil themselves” (152). The references to curtains and cloaks in the Ayahs quoted above have been enough, however, to justify and even entrench veiling and segregation systems in Muslim cultural and religious behavior. Modest behavior and veiling of a body are accepted by Muslims as Islamic

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<sup>6</sup> Traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, which are used to expound and explain Quranic injunctions. The Hadith and the Quran together form the textual evidence on which Muslim behavior and practices are based.



injunctions to be followed as part of their faith—how much of a woman’s body to be veiled is left to interpretation and cultural practice. In Pakistan, the injunction to veil is followed in myriad ways, and is regulated by a family’s class, level of education and ethnicity, among other factors.

To illustrate the complexities of the way different veils are adopted and used by both men and women, I begin with an analysis of Tehmina Durrani’s novel *Blasphemy* (1998) which locates all its action in rural Pakistan, focusing exclusively on the life of a Sufi Pir’s wife confined to a zenana—a portion of a house devoted to the use of the household’s women. I then move on to analyze Maniza Naqvi’s novel *Mass Transit* (1996), which focuses on a different type of domestic arrangement—a sprawling, mansion-like house that is located in Karachi, a metropolitan city of Pakistan. My final chapter focuses on Shahid Nadeem’s *Neelay Haath* (1989)—a television drama serial broadcast on Pakistan Television (PTV) which focuses on a women’s jail-cell in Karachi—and compares it to his theatrical farce, “Burqavaganza” (2007) which uses the veil as a metaphor for political and social cover-ups. I focus on a range of genres, and foreground multiple problematics of class, social and spatial settings as well as different manifestations of the veiling and segregation system to show that the literary and cultural representations of the veiling and segregation system both (a) challenge the patriarchal norms that sanction specific types of violence against women, and (b) simultaneously celebrate the protection afforded to women by the enveloping folds of the veil itself.

Given Pakistan's intrinsic identification as an Islamic country (or a country for South Asia's Muslims),<sup>7</sup> any critique of the practice of veiling and segregation is generally interpreted as a critique of Islam itself, leaving Pakistani feminists faced with a conundrum: their choices seem to be to either ask for women's emancipation within an Islamic framework or to insist that women's rights in Pakistan should be couched in terms of international human rights (Gardezi 51).<sup>8</sup> In both frameworks (quasi-secular<sup>9</sup> or religious), however, the veiling and segregation system itself is either left unquestioned or is simply accepted as a necessary compromise, as discussed by Amina Jamal in her article "Feminist 'selves' and Feminism's 'Others'" (2005). Jamal has shown that feminist activists in the post-9/11 Pakistani milieu face a challenge: their choices seem to be to either acknowledge women's activism derived from their Muslim identity and risk compromising their own critique of Islamist (read: fundamentalist) agendas, or to reject religiously fueled activism in its entirety, which would lead to the "fanning [of] colonialist desires to liberate Muslim women from the veil" (Jamal "Feminist selves" 55). The increasingly troublesome division between "religious" and "quasi-secular" feminism has resulted in a particularly paradoxical relationship with the veiling and segregation system on the part of Pakistani feminist artists

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<sup>7</sup> Pakistan was founded in August 1947, on the eve of India's independence from the British. The country was meant to be a safe haven for India's Muslims, but political analysts have continued to grapple with what actually constitutes "Pakistani identity" given the (often contradictory) demands of regional (provincial) and religious identity. The word "Pakistan" literally means "Land of the pure".

<sup>8</sup> See my detailed discussion of Pakistani feminism in Chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> Given Pakistan's foundation as an Islamic country, and General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization campaign, even feminists who use "secular" feminist rhetoric to justify their claims for Pakistani women's emancipation, do not necessarily reject religion itself. Some "secular" feminists assert that Islam should be separated from legal debates (see Asma Jehangir) and others claim that secular women's rights can be demanded within Islam's socio-political framework, given the specific rights "awarded" to Muslim women by the religion itself (see Rafia Hasan). Since Pakistani feminists do not challenge Islam, or religious principles, I choose to use "quasi-secular" to describe Pakistani feminists' activism.

and activists. By neglecting to address their own complex reactions to the segregation system, Pakistani feminists and artists have failed to address, and to redress, the specific problems caused by the often strict implementation of the segregation system. A demand for universal education for girls, for example, entails the traversing of domestic boundaries—in order to get a quality education, a girl would have to leave the seclusion of purdah<sup>10</sup> and attend school. Pakistani feminists, however, tend to ignore the specific impact of the veiling and segregation system, preferring, instead, to focus on other “social-ills” (like the denial of basic food and nutrition to young girls and women in rural Pakistan as well as in the poorer areas of urban cities). This selective focus has proven to be particularly detrimental to the Pakistani feminists’ attempts to win concessions from patriarchy, as my first chapter will illustrate in detail.

My detailed discussions of the representations of different types of veils in literary and cultural texts by Pakistani feminist artists foregrounds this paradoxical relationship with the veiling and segregation system on the one hand, and feminist activism for women’s emancipation (that continues to grapple with religious dogma and the demand for international human rights) on the other. In order to analyze the specific impact of the veiling and segregation system on women’s mobility and activism in Pakistan, it is important to understand the differences between each type of veil adopted by Pakistani women, to which I now turn.

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<sup>10</sup> “Purdah” is an Urdu word that literally means curtain, but is used to refer to the segregation system.

### 1.3 From Zenana to Dupatta: Different types of veils and their impact on women's mobility

In this dissertation, I refer to multiple manifestations of the veiling and segregation system, collectively called “chador aur chardewari” [veil and the four walls] in Urdu, represented by the zenana, burqa, chador and dupatta. The zenana is the enclosed space in a home devoted to the use of Muslim women, and is referred to as the purdah system in common parlance in Pakistan. According to Nasra Shah, in Pakistan, “82 percent of women in urban areas and 47 percent in rural areas follow purdah customs” (32) which she defines as confinement of women to living quarters separate from those of men (32) and the wearing of a burqa or chador in public. Men, unrelated to the women occupying the zenana, are not allowed to cross the threshold. Women leave the confines of the zenana only when necessary, and then usually when covered by a burqa, or some form of veil that shields the woman's body from strange men's gazes.

The burqa is an all-enveloping, sheath-like garment worn by Muslim women that covers the body from head to toe. Each Muslim country has its own version of the burqa, with the most recognizable being the Afghani interpretation which is a loose fitting, voluminous gown-like garment, with a hat to fit snugly over the head, and net-like holes covering the eye area, to allow its wearer to see where she is going. The most popular version used in Pakistan consists of a two piece garment: a long, thin coat-like garment accompanied by a head-covering that resembles a catholic nun's wimple, with a veil that is drawn over the face. Unlike Talibanized-Afghanistan or the Saudi Arabian monarchical state, where the burqa is mandatory, some families do not enforce the burqa in Pakistan, nor is it a legal requirement of the state. Women wishing to cover their bodies, then, do so with the chador—

a voluminous shawl-like garment wrapped around a woman's head and shoulders, an Iranian import to Pakistan and India. Another version of the veil, specific to Pakistan, is the dupatta, which is another shawl-like garment, slung over the shoulders. Since it is a part of the shalwar kameez (long tunic and baggy trousers) favoured by most Pakistani women, the length and size of the dupatta are determined by the dictates of fashion.

The hijab, another version of the Muslim veil, is the headscarf, favoured by Muslim women in the North American and European diaspora, and is now becoming recognized more and more as the acceptable, urbanized version of the veil in most Islamic countries. In Karachi, and in other urban centers of Pakistan, the hijab is now worn with the shalwar kameez and dupatta ensemble, and matches the outfit in colour and fabric.

Niqab is a part of the burqa, and refers to any piece of cloth used to cover a woman's face. In Canada, head coverings (hijab) have been accepted as an integral part of the Muslim dress-code, but the covering of one's face with the help of a Niqab have been rejected, as evidenced by the ban on face-coverings during Citizenship Oath-taking ceremonies. In Pakistan, niqab and burqa are part of the same ensemble, due to which reason I do not distinguish between the two in this dissertation. I use burqa to refer to both the cloak, and the face-covering.

Each type of veil has a specific type of impact on women's mobility, with the zenana (women's quarters) as the most restrictive in its impact, and the dupatta (long scarf) as the least limiting. The zenana is an actual section of the house, devoted exclusively to the use of the household's women, and completely closed to unrelated men. In the households where the zenana is present and where the purdah system is strictly enforced, women rarely step out of the zenana, and if they do, they are accompanied by an adult man who is related to the

women. Women, who step out of the zenana to visit friends and family or to run errands, must be covered and shielded completely in those households. Thus, the families that practice and enforce complete seclusion do so by establishing a complex and intricate system of veils, curtains and walls that do not allow the woman's body to be seen by strange men's gazes. As I will note during my detailed discussion of Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*, in my second chapter, some women who are secluded completely, belong to the upper-classes, the elite, who can afford to not only lose a woman's income, but to also designate specific resources to keeping women shielded and protected. Differences in class, economy and domestic arrangements all have a significant impact on how a woman chooses to veil herself in order to navigate the, often blurred, borders between public (read male) and private (read female) domains.

#### 1.4 The Portable Closet: Negotiating the Borders between Domestic and Public Spaces

The question that I pose, as I analyze the literary and cultural texts in subsequent chapters, is whether the burqa and the zenana, as well as the multiple manifestations of the veil, are intrinsically restrictive forces in women's lives, or whether the veil and the gender segregation system in Pakistan can justifiably be acknowledged as protective shields for women attempting to negotiate the male-dominated public and private spaces as depicted in the texts. I will show that the zenana and the purdah system in Pakistan are used by patriarchy to maintain control over women's mobility, and to act as barriers to women's

participation in the libidinal economy<sup>11</sup> and the labour market of Pakistan. I will also show that women have consistently used the veils to traverse, even transcend, the barriers, participating in, and taking advantage of, the libidinal economy in specific ways. Anita Weiss's discussions of the spatial organization of Lahore,<sup>12</sup> for example, has shown that the donning of the burqa (or a form of the veil, by extension) by a woman as she steps out of the four walls of her home, symbolizes her chastity. Without some form of the veil covering her body, a woman is presumed to be unprotected, and thus, both dangerous and deserving of attack from unrelated men. The multiple forms of the veil, in this scenario, represent the zenana, signaling the family's adherence to religious injunctions of modesty, while simultaneously gesturing towards the economic necessity of leaving the sanctified seclusion and protection of the zenana.

The portable closet<sup>13</sup>—a term that I use in this dissertation to refer to the enclosure created by the folds of the burqa (as well as the dupatta or chador that function in a similar

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<sup>11</sup> “Libidinal economy” signals Jean-Francois Lyotard’s use of the term to suggest a philosophy of the economy of desire (Williams 39) in which “matter is always treated in terms of desire, in terms of libido, even if that treatment is itself libidinal or highly charged” (Williams 39). Lyotard, in his work *Libidinal Economy*, writes against the cold detachment of theory, and instead, suggests that desire and libido can be channeled to question the detachment of theory from its subject, a singularly post-structuralist move. I use this term deliberately to foreground my own reading of the veil as a discourse and a system that is open to multiple, and competing, modes of reading, interpretation and application.

<sup>12</sup> See my detailed discussion of Weiss’s work in my first chapter

<sup>13</sup> I use the word “closet” deliberately, to signal Mark Wigley’s implicit linking of architectural organization and patriarchal control over women’s mobility in his essay “Untitled: The Housing of Gender”. In his essay, Wigley describes an intricate system of closeting and of locks that ensure gender segregation in a European house. His analysis is context specific; he focuses on nineteenth century European domestic arrangements, but his delineation of a domestic space that functions around the concept of closeting of female sexuality, or by organizing space so that women, and sexuality, are confined to the deepest recesses of the house remains applicable to late twentieth century domestic arrangements in Pakistan, where female sexuality continues to be closeted in specific ways.

manner) around a woman's body—here, brings with it the interiority, the femininity of the zenana, while encapsulating the need to function within the male-dominated public sphere. In my delineation of the term portable closet, I am indebted to Hanna Papanek's research, who suggested, in 1982, that the burqas functioned like "mobile homes" in Pakistan, allowing women to step out of seclusion to participate in the labour economy. Lila Abu-Lughod extended this argument, and applied it to post-9/11 discourse surrounding women's un/veiling in her essay "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" My own work celebrates the zenana's "portability" but by coupling it with the concept of closeting, I highlight the paradox as well as the complexity inherent in the burqa's, and the veil's portability. It may signal modesty, but it also hides, covers, specific types of abuse, an assertion that I will continue to elaborate upon in this dissertation. The space becomes a hybrid of the interior and the exterior, for the burqa is worn only when the woman needs to be in the public spaces of the city—schools, colleges and offices where she may need to interact with unrelated men. The burqa is taken off, discarded, when in the company of women, and men who belong to the woman's family: father, brother, son, husband.<sup>14</sup> The fabric of the burqa, then, is theoretically linked to the walls of the zenana, for as long as a woman wears her burqa in the public domain, she is protected by the sanctified sacredness of the zenana's spatiality. Just as unrelated men cannot enter the boundaries of a household's zenana, unrelated men's gazes

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Closet also refers to the closeting of sexuality, or of remaining in, or coming out of the closet in the homoerotic sense.

<sup>14</sup> The Arabic/Urdu word for men in front of whom a woman can remain unveiled (but always be modest) is mahram. Na-mahram men are men unrelated to a woman, and those that a woman could potentially marry, for example a woman's male cousins of marriageable age and men from a different family.



cannot penetrate the fabric shroud of the burqa. Even when a woman does not don a burqa, she continues to wear some form of the fabric veil—be it the chador, the dupatta or the hijab—which then acts as the barrier between men and women. An impalpable barrier—a curtain, a hijab<sup>15</sup>—is erected as soon as a woman dons a fabric veil. The fabric of the veil makes the zenana portable, allowing women to signal their religiosity and their intrinsic chastity.

I propose that the Muslim veil in its current manifestation in Pakistan is not intrinsically oppressive, and that a re-imagining of the veil's impact on women's mobility is necessary in order to understand the impact of, and possible resistance to, the veiling and segregation system in Pakistan. I maintain a focus on the fabric of the veil itself in this dissertation, and characterize the various types of veils as barriers between the feminine (religious) interior and the masculine (semi-religious) exterior. I draw my theoretical foundation from Luce Irigaray's contemplations on the veil-curtain<sup>16</sup>--which she characterizes as paradoxically ethereal and impenetrable simultaneously—and the connection of that curtain to the specifically female-dominated domestic spaces in Pakistani fiction from the 1990's. I draw important connections between the theoretical links made by Irigaray among the veil, space and the female body and the architectural divisions that characterize Pakistani domestic arrangements in order to challenge the (primarily Western) reading of the zenana as a restrictive, oppressive and fecund space. I read the zenana, instead, as a womb-

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<sup>15</sup> The Arabic word "hijab" literally means barrier. I discuss the word hijab, and its implications for my reading of the purdah system in Pakistan in my first chapter.

<sup>16</sup> See my detailed discussion of Irigaray in Chapter 2, where I discuss *Plato's Hystera*, and the implication of Irigaray's re-reading for the depiction of the zenana in Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*.

like space, designed to confine women's movement to and from that space, but also one that can be comforting and protective, intensely feminine in nature. It is a space that both confines women, and at the same time, also enables, women's community, providing a space for friendship and discourse, offering a chance for future mobility and change for women. Through my analysis of the representation of zenana-like spaces in *Blasphemy*, *Mass Transit* and *Neelay Haath*, I show that the zenanas are paradoxical spaces, conducive to particular freedoms possible only in an all-female environment as Gail Minault<sup>17</sup> illustrates in her work, but at the same time, spaces that imprison women, and conceal specific forms of patriarchal violence and abuse of women.

I use a dual approach in my explication of the paradoxical spaces created by the zenana and the portable closet: I begin by drawing theoretical inspiration from Western feminists, architecture theory and postcolonial theory (Luce Irigaray, Homi Bhabha and Henry Urbach),<sup>18</sup> while I draw on material, political and historical work by Pakistani authors to nuance my theorizations about the spatiality of the veil. The three theorists I have identified envision the formation of a gendered identity in its direct relation to the re-reading of space and spatiality, albeit in very different (sometimes contradictory) ways. One of the major pitfalls of such connections between "Western" feminist thought (Irigaray) and a strictly "Eastern" practice<sup>19</sup> is the disjuncture between the socio-political contexts of each

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<sup>17</sup> I discuss Gail Minault's re-reading of the North Indian zenana as a vibrant social space in Chapter 1

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 3, where I discuss both Bhabha and Urbach in detail.

<sup>19</sup> My use of "Western" and "Eastern" feminism sets up an arbitrary dichotomy between the presumably more progressive West and the disadvantaged East. I use the terms deliberately, to signal the slipperiness of descriptive labels like the "West", the "East" as well as the "Muslim veil" and "Pakistani woman". The

entity. As Chandra Mohanty points out in her now canonical essay “Under Western Eyes”, using western feminist thought to critique eastern practices results in entrenching western feminism in complacency: “they are worse off than us”. My thesis keeps the different contexts in the foreground in order to establish a useful dialogue between the theories of space arising from the West in order to help complicate the perception of the zenana. I will continue to keep issues of race, class and economy in the foreground, while simultaneously allowing interplay, an intersection, between theoretical methodology and social practice.

Following these theorists, I propose that the zenana and the veil are “primary enclosures” that are specifically feminine in nature (but essentially controlled by men), that the space created by the enclosure of the zenana’s concrete walls and the burqa’s fabric is a hybrid, interstitial space that brings with it the interiority and the femininity of the domestic space while simultaneously allowing the transition between the inside of the zenana and the outside of the male world. I also argue that the space created by the zenana and the burqa (of which the hijab and the dupatta are symbols) is reminiscent of the interstitial, queer closet, discussed by Urbach, with the fabric of the veil itself standing in for the door of the closet that inhabits the liminal space between the inside and the “outside”.

The portable closet is necessary to help free women from the confines of the zenana’s four walls, without challenging male domination in its entirety. My thesis explores this interstitiality of the veiled woman’s body in public space through my analysis of Tehmina

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intention here is to gesture towards the “us vs. them” dichotomy set up in many debates about the Muslim veil, while simultaneously troubling the arbitrariness of the dichotomy.

Durrani's *Blasphemy* and of Maniza Naqvi's *Mass Transit*, as well as through my reading of Shahid Nadeem's *Neelay Haath* and "Burqavaganza"; I show that the veil—in its manifestations as burqa, dupatta, chador and hijab—helps women negotiate and even challenge the borders between domestic and private space, and that it represents specific types of compromises between feminists and patriarchy. By wearing the veil, a woman signals her acquiescence with Islamic rules of modesty and of social interactions between men and women, a signal that forces men to acknowledge her as a "good" and "moral" woman, as opposed to the assumption that if a woman has stepped beyond the boundaries of her domestic space, then she must be a fallen woman. It is important to remember, however, that the zenana is, and continues to be, a restrictive, imprisoning and suffocating space for the women who are forced to spend their entire lives within its pre-defined borders, as Durrani's characterization of the space will show. The zenana, and the portable closet, then, should not be celebrated unequivocally. Women pay a high price in the form of specific restrictions on mobility and (lack of) participation in the labour market when they use the veil to signal their chastity and their religiosity while negotiating the male dominated public spaces of cities and villages in Pakistan, as my discussions of both *Mass Transit* and *Blasphemy* will show. The veiling and segregation system, with its intrinsic connection to Islamic rules of modesty and gendered social segregations, has been largely left unchallenged by Pakistani feminists due to this very paradox: that the veiling system protects a woman's body, her (and her family's) honour, her chastity, at the same time as it suffocates and ensures a gender hierarchy, maintaining a status quo that ensures patriarchal control over women's lives and mobility.

## 1.5 Chapter Outlines

I begin my dissertation with a historical and political overview of the Pakistani feminist movement, and its seemingly non-existent relationship with, or reaction to, the veiling and segregation system in Pakistan. The chapter traces significant moments in Pakistan's history, both pre- and post-partition, during which the veiling and segregation system was used (or ignored) by feminists for political gain. Even when the segregation system is used to define and confine women's mobility and their access to specific social and political institutions, as during the Zia decade, Pakistani feminists have chosen to remain silent about it, preferring, instead, to focus on developmental and socio-legal issues. The chapter identifies the two main streams in Pakistani feminism: the Islamic feminist stream that asserts that Islam has provided for women's emancipation which, if interpreted and implemented correctly, will eliminate the need for a women's movement; and the quasi-secular feminist stream that proposes that women's rights is a human rights issue, and should not be confused by religion and/or religious and cultural practices. My dissertation challenges both these streams. I propose that the segregation system itself acts as the suppressor, not the state or religion,<sup>20</sup> and that the system must be examined and even challenged in order to achieve emancipation. However, the segregation system cannot, should not, be completely abolished, as it functions as both a protector, and a suppressor simultaneously. In order to challenge the system, it is important to understand the complexity

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<sup>20</sup> The Pakistani state has identified itself inextricably with Islam. The official name of Pakistan as defined by the 1956 constitution is The Islamic Republic of Pakistan (see G. W. Choudhary "The Constitution of Pakistan" *Pacific Affairs* 29: 23, Sep 1956. 243-252). In this dissertation, I maintain a distinction between the religion (Islam) as an ideal construct (as it "should" be) and the Pakistani state's legal, constitutionalized, identification of itself as a specific type of Islamic state.

of the segregation system, and to evaluate the specific effects of veiling and segregation on women's mobility and on their participation in the labour market in Pakistan. The latter half of the chapter analyzes a music video by Sheema Kermani (a prominent feminist theatre personality and activist) called "Aseer Shahzadi [Imprisoned Princess]" (2002). The video, based on Fahmida Riaz's<sup>21</sup> poem, helps illustrate the complexity of the veiling and segregation system in Pakistan, as it establishes visual links between veiling, segregation, architectural features (lattice windows for example) and patriarchal violence (domestic abuse, honour killings). Kermani's dramatization of Riaz's poem foregrounds veiling and segregation as an intrinsic part of the systemic, patriarchal oppression of women in Pakistan, but does not reject the veil itself in its entirety—the closing sequences of the video feature freed women who sing and dance with dupattas slung over their shoulders or wrapped around their bodies. Kermani's music video and Riaz's poem both demonstrate the intricate balance struck, as well as the specific compromises made by feminists in Pakistan when it comes to the complex problematic of the veil and the segregation system.

The socio-historical overview of the veil, and Pakistani feminists' paradoxical relationship with it, is followed by three chapters that analyze texts by Pakistani feminists and artists. Each chapter highlights the different types of spaces surrounding the portable closet, beginning with a rural domestic space in *Blasphemy*, moving on to an urban domestic space in *Mass Transit* and ending with a literal incarceration of women in a jail-cell in *Neelay Haath*.

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<sup>21</sup> Fahmida Riaz is a well-known Urdu feminist poet.

I analyze Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*, in my second chapter, and focus specifically on the characterization of the zenana as a cavernous space, a primary enclosure that troubles the border between religious, sacrosanct space and non-religious space. The zenana within the novel functions as a comforting, crowded but also isolating (for Heer, the narrator) space, one that envelopes, enfolds women in the name of religious protection, as it simultaneously conceals abuses and sexual transgressions. Like Irigaray's cave in *Plato's Hystera*, the zenana is controlled by men, but is a distinctly feminine space, one that entraps and ensnares, but also encircles, sheathes and protects simultaneously. I question whether it is the space (the courtyard, the bedroom) and the burqa that need to be challenged as manifestations of patriarchal controls over rural women's lives, or the feudal system itself that uses religious injunctions for its own selfish gains. As my discussion of the exclusively feminine space created by the walls of the zenana and the fabric of the burqa will show, the zenana itself (as well as the burqa to an extent) can be a liberating and comforting space. It becomes a threat only when Pir Sain penetrates the space—it is his presence that is threatening, not necessarily the space or the walls themselves. Heer cannot find a way to control either her space and environment, or her life while she is confined to the walls of the zenana. When she does step out of the zenana, she is covered by the folds of the burqa, which effectively replaces the walls of the zenana, heightening Heer's sense of imprisonment and confinement, at least initially. The same burqa shows up in the epilogue of the novel, and is used as a mask by Heer, who revels in the anonymity it provides to her, the same anonymity that was troublesome when her burqa represented the zenana and Pir Sain's control over her life. The novel, thus, complicates the segregation system, even reveling in the protection it can afford

to the veil's wearers, without rejecting it completely. Instead, it challenges the patriarchal forces that use the segregation system to mask tyranny and domestic abuse.

Where *Blasphemy* focuses on a specific family in rural Sindh, Pakistan, Maniza Naqvi's *Mass Transit*, the focus of my third chapter, is set in Pakistan's metropolitan city, Karachi. The novel maintains a focus on domestic spaces, and the problematic of feeling-at-home. The switch in location also signals a switch in analytical approaches to the veil. Unlike the zenana in *Blasphemy*, women in *Mass Transit* are not secluded into a specific section of the house, and are, instead, considerably more independent. Gender segregation, however, continues to manifest itself through a complex system of small walls, fabric curtains and fabric sheets as space defining tools. The novel's unrelenting focus on the domestic spaces of the women who interact with Safina, as well as its focus on the (im)mobility of those women, highlights the system of segregation and veiling that organizes both the structures of private, domestic space and the built environments of the city. It also foregrounds the political impetus behind the use of fabric veils in the public locations of an urban city, where the absence of a fabric veil places a woman at risk of attack and ridicule on the streets and in public buildings. Here, the veil—in its manifestation as the dupatta casually slung over a shoulder, fabric sheets that define and confine space, and small walls that are visually as well as socially impenetrable in spite of their diminutive size—signals a complex system of barriers that seek to define spaces in binary terms: sacred space of the interior as opposed to the non-religious (and thus, dangerous) space of the exterior, or the feminized domestic space vs. the more masculine city at large. The veil and the segregation system, the portable closet, then, allows women to successfully negotiate the boundaries between the interior world of women (the domestic space) and the more public space of the city, as well as to inhabit the



interstitial, third space, that exists between the confining space of the domestic, and the “dangerous” city. This third space is distinctly fractured along class and economic as well as gender lines.

My focus in the fourth chapter of this dissertation is on two works by the same authors: Shahid Nadeem and Madiha Gauhar, both of whom critique the liberal feminist ideal of emancipation for Pakistani women by focusing on specific, “human rights related” issues (legal changes, rape). I focus on two plays by the authors—a PTV Drama serial *Neelay Haath* and a theatrical production “Burqavaganza”—and show that their critique succeeds at some levels but the veiling system itself is left unchallenged. In both the drama serial and the play, the veil is used as a symbol of female chastity and modesty, but neither of the two texts manages to critique the veil’s intrinsic power over women’s mobility in an effective manner. The women who are incarcerated for various crimes in *Neelay Haath*, for example, characterize the jail as a form of the zenana, and all the women in jail wear either the dupatta, or the chador wrapped around their bodies in various configurations. They use the veil to signal class and economic status, and to show respect to figures of authority regardless of gender, but the need for veils in a women-only jail cell is left unproblematized and unquestioned. “Burqavaganza”, on the other hand, seeks to critique “cover-ups” through a deployment of the burqa as a metaphor for masks and disguises, but in its use of the burqa as only a metaphor, the play effectively silences the effect of the all-enveloping burqa on its wearers, which may or may not always be positive.

I aim to critique the deployment of the veiling and segregation system for political and theatrical purposes, a deployment that de-politicizes the wearing of the veil while simultaneously making the veil itself a political tool that can polarize Pakistani audiences

significantly. What is missing in that specific construction is an understanding of the complexity of the fabric veil, and its intricate connection to the system of walls, architectures and barriers that conceal a woman's body while revealing and exposing femininity simultaneously.

As I will show in my dissertation, Pakistani feminists invariably avoid addressing the demand for “chador aur chardewari”, preferring, instead, to direct energies into socio-legal reforms that would, presumably, address basic human rights issues. Challenging the institution of the veil itself is immediately perceived as a challenge to Islam, demonstrated by my discussion of the controversy surrounding the staging of Shahid Nadeem's play, “Burqavaganza”. Political leaders, feminist activists, artists, even college girls, all use the fabric veil both as a necessary symbol of compromise as well as one of rebellion—the way a veil is worn and the type of veil that is chosen becomes an effective way of signaling a woman's adherence to Islamic rules of modesty and chastity, as I will show during my discussion of Shahid Nadeem's *Neelay Haath*. The more secluded and shielded a woman, the more religious and protected she is. The degree of isolation and seclusion of a woman's body showcases a family's religious values and the price that family is willing to pay for that signaling. My discussion of both, Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* and of Maniza Naqvi's *Mass Transit*, will foreground this idea, while analyzing the impact of segregation on women's mobility. Kermani's video acknowledges the inherent power of the veil and the system that sanctions it—she does not show unveiled adult women, but she does gesture towards the need to question the structures that seek to subjugate women in the name of religion and culture. However, that questioning can only happen once the veil is lifted.

## Chapter 1

### 2 Spatial Negotiations: The Women's Movement in Pakistan and the Veil, Pre- and Post-Partition.

#### 2.1 Introduction

In order to complicate the politics of gendered space as represented in literature and theatrical performances by women writing during (and about) the 1990's in Pakistan, I focus on the decade following General Zia-ul-Haq's death<sup>22</sup> (1988-1999) and preceding General Pervez Musharraf's dictatorship (1999-2008) in this chapter. I unpack the impact of the 1990's political instability specifically on women's lives as presented in literary production arising out of that time period. This introductory chapter begins with a socio-political and historical map of Pakistan, tracing the role of Muslim women in the freedom movement of the early twentieth century (c1900-1947) and continuing with their role in, and their complicated relationship with, the new religiously-defined State of Pakistan post-partition. I unpack the complex set of guidelines and religious injunctions that seem to confine the feminist movement in Pakistan to particular developmental issues (access to education and jobs for example) without allowing space for a questioning of the veiling system and gender segregation that forms the basis of social and domestic organization.

Historically, the Islamic practice of veiling and segregating women has been the focus of scholarly attention, but in the post 9/11 era, with the revelation of enforced veiling of the women of Afghanistan, the issue has gained particular currency in popular

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<sup>22</sup> General Zia-ul-Haq died in a plane crash in 1988.

media, with the practice of veiling condemned by American/European feminists,<sup>23</sup> and defended by most Islamic feminists,<sup>24</sup> who claim that the veil provides particular kinds of freedoms to women in an Islamic social setting. Invariably, those discussing the status of women in Islam focus almost exclusively on Arab and (more recently) Afghan women, and thus exclude Muslim women who are non-Arab. Fatima Mernissi, now canonical for Islamic feminists, for example, uses Moroccan women as her case studies, with the assumption that the conclusions she draws are universal, and can apply to all Muslim women, regardless of their geographical and cultural affiliations. My aim is to challenge such universalizing claims, and to test the hypotheses advanced by Islamic Feminists against a non-Arab, but Islamic cultural setting. The problems identified by Pakistani feminists, for example, are very different from those concerning Fatima Mernissi, Nawal el Saadawi and Ghassan Jasser, among others. Pakistan identifies itself as a largely Muslim country, as its official name proclaims (Islamic Republic of Pakistan), and yet, the issues addressed by Pakistani feminists revolve around access to education, jobs, and the right to make personal decisions (like abortion),<sup>25</sup> with veiling and segregation sidelined as an unimportant, but necessary, practice. I argue that women's lack of access to education, the workforce and the denial of other basic rights in Pakistan stems directly from the

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<sup>23</sup> See work by Joan Scott (*Politics of the Veil*) and Judith Ezekiel for examples of the European/North American feminist impulse to characterize the veiling system as a particularly oppressive system. The banning of the headscarf in French schools, and the debates surrounding the proposal and implementation of the law also exemplify this instinct to condemn the gender segregation system.

<sup>24</sup> See work by Katherine Bullock, Alia Al-Saji, Sajida Alvi et al, Homa Hoodfar and Saba Mahmood (with Charles Hirschkind), among others.

<sup>25</sup> Abortion is illegal in Pakistan, and is punishable by death. It is only allowed if deemed medically necessary to save the life of the mother.

belief that Muslim women must remain out of sight. Subsequent chapters will study how the veiling and segregation practice has been questioned by different Pakistani women writers and theatre personalities. I show that the complete rejection of the veiling system in a non-Arab, but Muslim, setting may neither be practical, nor desired, and that the gendered division of domestic space allows particular freedoms for women that are not possible in a de-segregated spatial arrangement. A detailed discussion of the etymological, historical and religious roots of the word “hijab” (which is now accepted as the general Arabic word<sup>26</sup> for Muslim veil) will help explicate this particular paradox. I hope to highlight the *zenana* (women’s section/ quarters/ designated area), and the functioning of women within, and without, this specifically feminine zone as a particularly complex space, one that allows certain freedoms at the same time as imposing restrictions on movement and kinship development.

By foregrounding the historical development of the practice of *purdah* in Pakistan, I will show that the influence of colonial injunctions, the freedom movement from the 1920’s to the 1940’s and the formation of Pakistan as a specifically Islamic society defined the current use of the *burqa* and the veil in public spaces. I seek to contextualize the practice of veiling/*purdah* as a specifically Pakistani phenomenon, distinct from the revolutions that characterized a major part of the Middle-East in the latter half of the twentieth century. This historical contextualization of the status of Muslim and Pakistani women in the twentieth century will be followed, in this chapter, by a detailed discussion

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<sup>26</sup> Fadwa El Guindi shows that there is no single Arabic (and by extension Urdu, which claims Arabic as its linguistic root) word for the veil (6). Etymologically, “*Hijab* is not the Arabic word for ‘veil’...It is a complex notion that has gradually developed a set of related meanings” (El Guindi 152) one of which refers to the veiling practices of Muslim women in diasporic and urban spaces in the twenty-first century.

of the theoretical foundations of veiling—both as a religious injunction and as a cultural practice—in order to launch my reading of purdah as a tool of negotiation and creativity in subsequent chapters. I propose that the veil functions as a “third space”, one that allows women to inhabit the interstices of public and private space in order to win specific economic and personal freedoms without becoming “victims” of patriarchal forces, an assertion that I will illustrate with the help of Sheema Kermani’s dramatization of Fahmida Riaz’s feminist poetry through a music video: “Aseer Shahzadi [Imprisoned Princess]”. My discussion of General Zia-ul-Haq’s dictatorship, and the legal changes brought about by him to the constitution of Pakistan, will foreground the political expediency of adopting the veil in order to win other political and social freedoms on the part of Pakistani feminists.<sup>27</sup> I argue that, contrary to Pakistani feminists’ arguments, Zia’s insistence on the “chador aur chardewari [veil and four walls]” for women, and Pakistani men’s tacit acceptance of this principle, resulted in the acceptance of legal changes that set the feminist movement back in Pakistan.

## 2.2 Islamic Feminism vs. Secular Human Rights: Obstacles to Emancipation

A study of the veil in Pakistan cannot be divorced from the politics of nationhood and nation-formation in the region due to the veil’s intrinsic foundation in the religion of Islam and Pakistan’s own explicit foundation as the nation for Muslims. Pakistan was

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<sup>27</sup> My discussion of Benazir Bhutto’s (the first woman Prime Minister of a Muslim State) adoption of the diaphanous muslin dupatta to cover her hair as a way to pander to the “religious right” will help explain this claim. I discuss Benazir’s veiling, and feminists’ reaction to it, in the sub-section entitled “Impact of Islamization on Women” later in this chapter.

founded in 1947, in the midst of one of the greatest migrations and dislocation of peoples of the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> As Rafia Hasan puts it,

The Muslim state of Pakistan was carved out of the Indian subcontinent on the basis of its Islamic ideology. However, this does not imply that the nation is only secular or theocratic in its basis. Pakistan is both and neither, for it aspires to be theistic without being theocratic and aims to improve life in this world within the framework of a supraindividual and supraphysical verity without being secular.

(68)

According to Hasan, the theological roots of the nation's claim to an identity distinct from an "Indian" one, suggests that women's position in such a society would automatically become one of equality and emancipation, for "[e]quality in the role and status of women [in Islam] has been ensured and dealt with comprehensively within a framework of rights and privileges in an Islamic society. While it is recognized that the two sexes have a certain natural division of functions, equality of fundamental human rights has been enjoined" (Hasan 68). However, as feminists are quick to point out, the reality is very different from these ideological roots. According to Hasan, in spite of the detailed legal guidelines for women's rights and privileges in an ideal Islamic civil society, any demand for those rights in Pakistan was "met with considerable opposition due to various sociological, economic, and political reasons. The forces of custom,

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<sup>28</sup> For relevant statistics and analyses, see Didur, Jill. *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006, or Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

orthodoxy, and reaction joining hands at times with colonial rulers did much to water down the rights of equality granted by Islam” (Hasan 69). The presence of the British in the subcontinent further complicated the status of Muslim women, and they remained confined to their homes, conditioned by centuries of subservience to accept the prescribed role—that of submissive wife, daughter or sister (Hasan 69). This general claim about Muslim women’s status pre-partition is belied by women’s activism in the Independence movement—activism that will be discussed shortly—exemplified by Muslim women writers like Ismat Chughtai and Qurratulain Hyder,<sup>29</sup> both of whom are accepted as canonical literary figures for pre- and post-partition Urdu literature. In spite of exceptions like these, and other activists that I will soon identify, however, Muslim women’s role in domestic and family life remains a subservient one in Pakistan.

Ayesha Jalal points out in her essay on the Pakistani state and the position of women that “[a]fter nearly a decade of state-sponsored attempts at stifling women’s voices in the public arenas and pushing back the boundaries of their social visibility,<sup>30</sup> Pakistan has become the first state in the Islamic world to have a woman prime minister” (77),<sup>31</sup> and yet, “women’s relationship with the state in the Islamic social setting of Pakistan remains substantially unchanged economically, legally and politically” (Jalal 77). The question, then, is, how does a nation with “one of the lowest rates in the world

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<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of writer’s and artists’ role in the Independence struggle, see Talat Ahmed’s book, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nationalism*.

<sup>30</sup> Jalal is referring to General Zia-ul-Haq’s dictatorship, during which women’s participation in most public arenas was curtailed and the infamous Haddood Ordinance and the law of Qisas (proposed but amended) was legislated.

<sup>31</sup> Jalal is referring to the election of Ms. Benazir Bhutto as the first woman prime minister.



of female participation in the labour force” (Jalal 77) manage to elect a woman prime minister, and yet effect no change in the real lives of women? Jalal poses the question of whether a real change in the status of women is even desired. Coining the phrase “the convenience of subservience” Jalal suggests that the women of Pakistan have worked out a compromise with the state. She asserts that

So long as they [women belonging to the middle and upper classes] do not transgress social norms, women from the middle and upper strata in rural and urban areas alike are accorded respect as well as a modicum of privileges *within the sphere of the family* and, depending on their generational and marital status also in wider social networks...In fact, with a few notable exceptions of symbolic dissent—for instance a refusal to accept the institution of arranged marriage or the defiant pursuit of a professional career—most women drawn from these social segments have chosen the path of least resistance, perhaps because so far the most retrogressive ‘Islamic’ laws have not affected them in any appreciable manner.

(78; my emphasis)

Thus, the laws and social mores—including the veiling and segregation system—that have an adverse effect on the lived realities of women belonging to the lower strata of the social system do not necessarily affect the women belonging to the privileged elite, who are, in turn, in a position powerful enough to challenge those very laws and social mores.

According to Jalal,

As beneficiaries of social accommodations worked out over long periods of history, middle and upper class women everywhere have a stake in preserving the existing structures of authority and with it *the convenience of a subservience* that

denies them equality in the public realm but also affords privileges not available to women lower down the rungs of the social hierarchy. (79; my emphasis)

In as much as the compromise is understandable, it is also highly problematic, in that the privileges afforded to women include the “protection” of the veil and the restrictions of the family home.

According to Fauzia Gardezi, Pakistani feminists have failed to determine the ideological framework working within which feminists could potentially win universal rights and freedoms for Pakistani women. In her article “Islam, Feminism, and the Women’s Movement in Pakistan: 1981-91” she asserts that two of the “main problems encountered by the women’s movement in Pakistan have been (i) trying to work within an Islamic framework; and (ii) insufficient incorporation of feminism in the movement” (51). Crediting the formation of the Women’s Action Forum (WAF)<sup>32</sup> in 1981 with the official launch of a women’s movement in Pakistan, she shows that the initial formation was a reactive one, hastily-planned and executed in response “to issues set by the martial law government [of General Zia-ul-Haq]” (Gardezi 51). The question of working within an Islamic framework while seeking universal women’s rights in Pakistan has been one of the major sources of fragmentation within the women’s movement in Pakistan. Criticisms of specific laws in the 1980’s, for example, were almost always perceived as

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<sup>32</sup> The Women’s Action Forum was a group of women who came together in 1981 in Karachi (with chapters being formed in all five major urban centers of Pakistan within months) specifically to protest the legal changes wrought by General Zia-ul-Haq. It was one of the first grass-roots political movements that focused specifically on women’s legal rights. It led major demonstrations and protests, and attracted tremendous media attention. The WAF succeeded at some platforms (for example the removal of Dr. Israr’s invective from PTV) but had little impact on other issues.

criticism of Islam itself, a nuance that will be clarified as I discuss the Islamization<sup>33</sup> of Pakistan. The two streams of thought confronting the women's movement in Pakistan specially during General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship and in the 1990's, were whether women should use the Islamic framework to continue to fight for women's rights or if women need to reject religious dogma in favour of secular feminist rights. Gardezi shows that by choosing the Islamic framework, the Women's Action Forum, specifically the Lahore chapter, has succeeded in mobilizing women from the lower and lower-middle-classes, but has in turn failed to address real experiences of women's oppression (52-53). An appeal to a secular, progressive feminism, however, may not necessarily work in Pakistan either. Feminist analysis assumes gender-based oppression to be the greatest form of oppression (Gardezi 55). However, "women have different experiences based on characteristics other than gender; to struggle around gender alone is to down-grade this diversity and generalize the experiences of women" (Gardezi 55). What is needed, then, is a theoretical framework that would take two seemingly opposing points of view— Islamic feminism vs. secular feminism or universal human rights—and set them in dialogue with one another, to find an ideology that would mobilize the greatest number of women in Pakistan. In my detailed discussion of the impact of General Zia's Islamization on women, I will discuss this conundrum in detail through my readings of various feminist responses to Islamization. In order to understand what a new feminist framework in Pakistan may look like, however, it is important to address one of the biggest sources

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<sup>33</sup> Spelling of Islamization: Different scholars and critics have used varying spellings of the word including: islamicization, islamisation, islamicisation and islamization. I have chosen to use "Islamization" for the purposes of simplicity, but have kept original spellings used by critics when citing their work.

of patriarchal power in Pakistan—the veiling and segregation system that continuously seeks to control the mobility of women, ensuring that women’s access to financial independence through education and jobs is controlled by patriarchal forces, but also one that is consistently used by women to legitimize their claims to the public space, as well as to gain access to financial independence through jobs that they may not have access to without the veil.

### 2.3 Domestic arrangements and the Veil in Pakistan

The complexities of the veil, and its different interpretations throughout the Muslim world, are reflected in the multiple words used to denote the different types of veils and segregating practices. In Urdu alone, various words are used for the Muslim veil: *purdah*, for example, refers simultaneously to the practice of segregating women’s space and to the veil itself. According to Sitara Khan,

Purdah can be an excuse for debarring women from full socio-economic and political life, controlling women’s space and movement, to ensure pre-marital chastity and post-marital fidelity. Alternatively it can be seen as a ‘safe’ area in which women can relax, be massaged, plot against their men—especially their husbands—earn and spend income, and organize socio-political revolution. (26-27)

The word *purdah* is derived from the Persian word for curtain, and refers to the *chador* and/or *dupatta* (veil) drawn over the head as well as to the curtain suspended in the center of a room to demarcate women’s and men’s spaces. Khan relates the practice of gendered segregation to class, and suggests that only the very wealthy households could afford a *zenana* or an entire section of the household dedicated to the women while barred to all

men, except the very young. She asserts that if physical segregation was not possible in a household, “a Purdah [curtain] was used to indicate the demarcation line. In homes where even this was not possible, a scarf over the head seemed to suffice” (34), a suggestion that clearly links the use of the fabric veil to architectural divisions. A woman who chooses to leave the zenana, then, must cloak her body, and her (presumed to be) dangerous sexuality, with the very device that maintains the strict division between men and women of a household. In her study of the reception of Pakistani drama serials, Shuchi Kothari recounts the attitudes of women in a household, where, even if “the men of the house were not censorious, ‘one couldn’t just giggle and laugh in front of one’s susar (father-in-law)’” (293). This in turn suggests an ingrained sense of decorum and purdah. It also shows that women in Pakistani households are expected to cloak their very presence, if not behind a literal curtain, then behind the cloak of silence and decorum which defines women’s bodies along architectural lines, conflating the distinction between architectural tool, dress code and internalized self-censorship in an etymological twist.

Domestic spatial arrangements in Pakistan tend to be organized around the principles of gender segregation, regardless of class. The specific requirements for gender segregation hinge upon the idea that women, being the weaker sex, need protection of the household’s men, a protection that can be provided only within the confines of the domestic space. This also means that within familial structures of power, women invariably have little influence. Anita Weiss’s analysis of the old Walled City of

Lahore,<sup>34</sup> shows that “[s]pecific concepts of family and female separation have long-standing bases in South Asian cultural norms...we see that architectural structures accentuate how the gendered division of space correlates into a marked separation of male and female spheres” (“Women’s Empowerment” 125). Weiss establishes a direct correlation between the gendered division of space (construction of zenanas) and women’s restricted access to public jobs, education and health care. This, in turn, suggests that the historically rooted practice of women’s segregation, left unchallenged by women fighting to gain political freedoms like the repeal of the Haddood Ordinances (which I will discuss shortly), is continuously reinforced by separation of men and women both in the public and the private domain. It is important to note, here, that there is a distinction between the legal rights granted to Pakistani women in the Constitution of Pakistan, and the familial and social rules that govern women’s participation in, and attitudes towards, public spaces and institutions in which they could come in contact with un-related men. In spite of the many inroads women have made into the male domain, “[v]arious political figures periodically intimate the need for separate women’s bank branches, separate seating areas on buses, and even separate universities” (Weiss “Women’s Empowerment” 125). An analysis of the old Walled city of Lahore, also referred to as Hira Mandi [Diamond Market], demonstrates how architectural divisions represent the gender divisions in culture, and how these divisions are now being challenged by changes in demography and new socio-economic demands on the nuclear

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<sup>34</sup> Anita Weiss’s study is context-specific, with its focus on a specific part of Lahore, one that is entrenched in the historical link of Lahore with the Mughal Empire. I use her study of the gendered organization of domestic space to suggest that similar principles operate in other parts of Pakistan, given their connection to Islamic rules of gender segregation.

family, reflecting the “challenges of contemporary life” (Weiss “Women’s Empowerment” 125). Weiss shows, however, that in spite of the changing expectations, and in spite of women’s increased access to education and their contributions to the family income, “the gendered division of power within the family only changes slightly...work has minimal effect on increasing a woman’s decision-making power within the family or requiring its members to renegotiate gender roles” (“Women’s Empowerment” 130). Shahnaz Khan reinforces this assertion when she shows that in spite of increased mobility even if it is “only to and from work [...women] continue to be socialized as ideal daughters, mothers, and wives whose sexuality is under the control of more powerful members of their families” (86). This is further perpetuated and reinforced by “a number of factors, especially repressive images of women which had been promoted and perpetuated by the state” (Weiss “Women’s Empowerment” 131), specifically during General Zia’s Islamization campaign, which idealized the “chador aur chardewari”, as shown by Kothari’s analysis of TV drama serials during his dictatorship, where women appearing on television and other media were required to cover their heads at all times. I will discuss this directive in detail when I review Zia’s Islamization campaign. To reiterate, then: architectural divisions, and the regulated boundaries between the public and private help to maintain women’s disempowered, subjugated position within the family, as well as in the public domain.

Weiss shows that a woman’s sexuality is further regulated by social forces beyond the family home. Accordingly, physical restrictions on a woman’s mobility (through the use of strict purdah rules) are “being replaced by a new threat to her mobility: the rise in violence against women by unknown assailants, especially when women venture outside

their own neighborhoods” (“Women’s Empowerment” 131), a gesture towards rape as a political weapon. As soon as a woman leaves the protection and shelter of her family and neighborhood, she is considered to be “loose” and immoral, and thus an easy target, which, in turn, forces women to confine themselves to their domestic spaces as much as possible, in exchange for the “protection” afforded to them within the “chardewari”.

As Ismail Serageldin shows in his article “Watering the Garden,” Muslim architecture in general “is very different from the notion of a mechanistic, straitjacketed geometric ensemble...It reflects a sense of boundaries, physical and psychological, between the public and the private” (12), which in turn reinforces my connection of architectural arrangements with the (sometimes) enforced practice of veiling the woman’s body. Weiss discusses domestic architectural arrangements in detail to show how architectural settings define and confine women’s interactions with each other and society at large by focusing exclusively on the changing nature of domestic arrangements in Lahore. According to Weiss’s article, “The Gendered Division of Space and Access in Working Class areas of Lahore,” the gendered division of space is most apparent in the domestic arrangements of urban neighborhoods and sections like the Walled City, where men dominate the space outside the home and women restrict themselves to the inner, private and semi-private (stair cases, rooftops) spaces of the home. Thus, according to Weiss, “Women...engage in vibrant social interactions within the Walled City, but either within homes or in ‘semi-private space’. Staircases and *jharokas* [casements] provide for gender-specific meeting places, as do the ends of alleyways. ... Restrictions on a woman’s mobility are strictest when she considers leaving her neighborhood” (“Gendered Division” 77). According to Weiss, a desire for social mobility sees families



abandoning ancestral homes in the Walled City in favor of bungalow style housing, which in turn further complicates women's status and their inter-personal relationships. What used to be a vibrant social life conducted in the semi-private spaces of the Walled City is reduced to isolated existences in walled compounds/lawns of private bungalows. The only relief from social isolation, then, comes from access to higher-education—college and university campuses.

Although Weiss's research is locally specific, most of the conclusions she draws can be loosely applied to other urban centers of Pakistan like Karachi, even though the historical developments of each city are vastly different. Karachi, for example, lacks a "red-light" district as clearly defined, or as entrenched in the history of the Mughals as Lahore's Hira Mandi. It is important to note that the changing political environment of Pakistan after the 1947 partition of India affected spatial organization in Karachi significantly—the influx of refugees into Karachi during the 1940's and 1950's defined the city's development and growth—and that urban planning, or lack thereof, had a clear impact on how women related to each other in a given spatial setting.<sup>35</sup> Thus, urban planning and development, highly influenced by architectural movements of the West (especially architects like Le Corbussier who designed the city of Islamabad, Pakistan's capital), have posed specific challenges to women wishing to traverse the public-private boundaries. Over time, domestic arrangements in urban centers like Karachi and Lahore, and even in some rural areas, have undergone changes, as identified by Weiss, but spatial

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<sup>35</sup> I will address the spatial organization of Karachi and its distinct architecture in my third chapter on Maniza Naqvi's *Mass Transit*.

organization still revolves around gender segregation which, in turn, complicates the construction and maintenance of the zenana. Even though the injunction to veil applies to all Muslim women, not every woman is confined to a specific space. Depending on her class, age and her family's religious beliefs, a woman may either be completely secluded in a zenana-type enclosure or may go largely uncovered or unhampered by veils.

Domestic architecture, itself, in Pakistan, seeks to quite literally cloak the female body, while maintaining a strict polemic between public and private, male and female space. As Iftikhar Malik shows, in "traditional", rural areas of Pakistan, for example, "Women are always within the compound [of a house] while men meet and socialize in a separate section called *hujjra*" (103).

## 2.4 Muslim Feminists in India Pre-1947: Issues and Concerns

Published more than twenty years ago in 1987, Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed's book *Women of Pakistan* remains influential. They begin their study by establishing a firm link between the role and status of women in the mid- to late-twentieth century Pakistan, and the "social, political and economic development of a people's history" (1). They assert, then, that any study about the status of women in Pakistan must take into account the struggle for Muslim independence in "the sub-continent and the role of Islam in contemporary history. Inter-linked, the two [women's struggle and the role of Islam] have to be seen in the light of firstly, the evolution of Muslim politics and political thought in India and subsequently, political developments within Pakistan in the post-independence period" (1). It is this historical connection of Islam to politics and women's struggle for independence that this section will focus on, in order to ground the discourse of the veil in Pakistan in its socio-historical context.

According to Sitara Khan, the status of Muslim women in South Asia changed significantly with the advent of British colonial rule. She uses the example of inheritance laws, and suggests that prior to colonization, under Islamic (Mughal) law, Muslim women had the right to land ownership and control over inheritance. During British rule, Muslim women were “brought in line with...Hindu women, who could only ‘safe-keep’ the land for their minor sons, and whose only ‘inheritance’ came in the form of dowry upon her marriage” (Khan 14-15). Mumtaz and Shaheed assert, similarly, that “colonization did not necessarily improve the participation and position of women in society” (36). According to them, “[s]ince neither the status of women nor inter-family relationships had any bearing on their colonial power, the British left untouched customary and religious laws subordinating women” (37), which presumably include the customary practice of segregation and seclusion. Thus, British colonization had little impact on women’s status in the subcontinent, and where laws were, indeed, altered, they were to the detriment of Muslim women.

The struggle for women’s rights in the subcontinent, according to Mumtaz and Shaheed, began with a demand for the right to education. For women, “[e]ducation was clearly seen as means for loosening the control exercised by men over women, and it is precisely for this reason that it played such a central role in the struggle for women’s rights in India” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 38). Interestingly, the practice of purdah and segregation was left unchallenged by this struggle. The “preservation of Muslim culture” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 39) became the main focus of Muslim politics after the 1857 war, and since the Muslim veil had been constructed as an intrinsic part of that culture, it was neither challenged nor rejected by women seeking the right to equal access to education.

Mumtaz and Shaheed recount numerous instances in which Muslim women (albeit those belonging to the educated elite) participated in political rallies and movements during the independence struggle. One of these examples is that of Bi Amma, mother of the politically active Jauhar Brothers who launched the Khilafat movement. Mumtaz and Shaheed assert that in 1917, Bi Amma “broke with tradition and addressed the annual meeting of the all-male Muslim League in place of her son (Mohammed Ali) who had been arrested. At this meeting she spoke from behind her veil, but it was the first time that a Muslim woman had addressed a political meeting of men” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 43). Bi Amma subsequently removed her veil completely in public in 1921, an act which can be read symbolically as the lifting of the veil by all Muslim women. However, Mumtaz and Shaheed are quick to point out that “Bi Amma removed her veil simply because she found it bothersome in her own work, which was political in nature and not feminist” (43). It is important to note that the veil referred to here is probably the burqa, or full body cloak, and that Bi Amma was an elderly woman with grown sons, and could thus establish rhetorical, matronly relationships with all the men with whom she came into contact, effectively removing sexuality from the encounter between men and women. As Mumtaz and Shaheed point out, Bi Amma spoke “in lieu of her sons from a platform that was demanding justice for all Muslims [which] is probably why her action evoked such little negative response from among the more vocal Muslims” (44). Thus, the first casting off of the veil remained unmarked for it was not perceived as a defiance of male authority, simply as an act of irritation with the restrictions of the burqa itself, and that, too, on the part of an aging mother who concerned herself more with the political resistance movement than with the plight of women in general.

A similar paradox is identified by Ayesha Jalal, as she discusses the curious disjuncture between the Pakistani-Muslim state's tendency towards conservatism, especially in its attitudes towards women and the family, and the presence of articulate, accomplished Pakistani women. According to Jalal, "women of grit and mirth can be found in every phase of Pakistan's history, a tribute to the resilience of families that deride but never challenge the laws of social oppression, much less of state repression" (89), which, in turn, is a result of the "accommodation worked out between state and society within years of independence. According to the terms, the state's social pronouncements would always be dipped in the Islamic idiom. But it would not neglect to protect the right of its liberal citizens to deviate from the literal interpretations of the Islamic way of life" (Jalal 88-89).

An inkling of the post-independence alliance worked out by the privileged elite and the state of Pakistan is presented in the tepid attitude of Indian Muslims towards Bi Amma's casting off of the veil. Even though the decades preceding the independence of India were characterized by the mobilization of women in the Pakistan movement, women remained confined by the demands of seclusion and purdah. Mumtaz and Shaheed analyze women's role in the Pakistan movement of the 1940's, a political mobilization of the Muslims of India in favour of a separate state for Muslims, and assert that "the nationalistic struggle provided the environment in which Muslim women broke through traditional rules and restrictions, cast off their veils, left their homes, approached strangers, confronted the police, and entered politics" (47). Interestingly, the casting off of veils is seen, yet again, as part of a political strategy adopted to gain attention, rather than a direct challenge to Islamic rules of gender segregation. Historically, women's

veiling and seclusion and the matter of dress have remained tangential to the matter of women's rights in Pakistan. According to Mumtaz and Shaheed, the question of women's rights "was subsumed in the larger struggle for a national identity and freedom from colonial oppression...at a subconscious level women realized through their experience that what was acceptable for women in the nationalistic struggle, would have been *unacceptable* in a struggle for their rights that *created a direct confrontation with men*" (47; my emphasis). As Jalal points out, the political struggle for Pakistan was waged under the banner of a distinct Muslim identity, which in turn was heavily invested in the conventional social organization—women as vanguards of the home and family—of Indian Muslims, and thus, what "may have been something of a liberating experience" (Jalal 85) only succeeded in reasserting traditional attitudes—purdah and seclusion being one of them.

## 2.5 The Status of Women in Pakistan post-Independence: The Zia Years

The status of women in Pakistan during the decades following independence has been a changing one, and not necessarily for the better. Where Rafia Hasan's short essay on the status of women sees tremendous potential for women's improvement within the Islamic social and legal framework, Ayesha Jalal and Shahnaz Khan attack the specific laws purported to be based on Islamic injunctions—the Haddood Ordinances introduced during General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization program to be exact—and contend that the laws have proven to be misogynistic in their implementation, thus directly questioning the possibility of reform within an Islamic structure. I have already briefly addressed this particular paradox facing the women's movement. An account of General Zia's

dictatorship and the socio-legal changes affecting women's lives will now help explicate this quandary further.

It is important to note the social, economic and class distinctions that make the category "Pakistani women" a contested one. The country "Pakistan" consisted of two distinct geographical regions between 1947 and 1971: East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) and West Pakistan. After the 1971 war (which resulted in the independence of East Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh), West Pakistan became Pakistan, consisting of four major provinces: Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa (formerly known as North-West Frontier Province or NWFP) and Balochistan. For general purposes of analyses, these four provinces are usually divided further into two major categories—the largely rural and underdeveloped provinces of Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa and Balochistan and the relatively more developed and urbanized but largely neo-feudal provinces<sup>36</sup> of Punjab and Sindh (Mumtaz and Shaheed 21-23). As Mumtaz and Shaheed put it: "[t]he Pakistani woman... is a myriad creature for whom a single image does not suffice. To talk of Pakistani women is in fact to talk of groups of women—of clusters of similarity in a disparate reality" (21). Given the disparity and complexity of the category, I use the term "Pakistani woman" largely as a legal and political one, which has consistently included a relatively large number of urbanized, educated, articulate women belonging to the upper-middle and upper classes of Pakistan who speak on behalf of the silenced, invisible and illiterate majority of Pakistani women. Feminists and theatre practitioners like Sheema Kermani account for the unintentional silencing of working-

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<sup>36</sup> See map of Pakistan (Appendix A)

class women by inviting audience participation after their theatrical dramatizations of problems facing Pakistani women. Through her portrayal of issues and problems drawn from the lives of “largely illiterate... industrial workers or people doing small jobs in various sectors” (Afzal-Khan “Critical Stage” 97) Kermani views her efforts of consciousness-raising among the working-classes as a process that enables dialogue and inspires change. Other feminists like Shahnaz Khan foreground their own positions of power derived from education and class, using their privilege to gain access to, and then lend their voice to, the silenced rural majority. My own intervention challenges (the tacit) acceptance of the veiling system by feminists, in order to expose the detrimental effects of that system on women who do not have the power, or the capability, to challenge the status quo. As Jalal shows, it is convenient for upper-class women to remain subservient at some points, to ignore the purdah system, as it does not interfere with the activities of the upper-class women. In fact, the purdah system offers protection and stability to those who practice it. As Nasra M. Shah has shown, living in purdah is often perceived by women to be a source of prestige (33). Thus, upper-class women who benefit from the system have little to gain by challenging it. By highlighting this paradox, I hope to foreground the complexity of the purdah system: women belonging to the working-classes rely heavily on the protection afforded by the veil to traverse borders between the public and the private, while upper-class women use the veil to signal chastity and to establish rhetorical sisterhoods with the working-class women they are trying to help. A complete rejection of the veil, in this scenario, will only result in disempowering all Pakistani women. A focus on literary and cultural representations of rural, illiterate women helps bring the lived realities of Pakistani women’s oppression to the foreground,



even though the representations are tempered by authors' and feminists' locations,<sup>37</sup> as my discussion of Durrani's *Blasphemy*—which is set in rural Pakistan—will show.

Prior to Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship, women's status in Pakistan was one of subservience, but misogyny was not institutionalized. That is to say, women had specific legal rights under Family Laws and other Constitutional Acts which were either rescinded or amended during the Islamization campaign. Even though the Zia administration changed only a few laws, the social impact of those changes was significant for women, partly because the changes provided legal sanction for violence against women and allowed deep-rooted misogyny to emerge, a misogyny that has not been successfully suppressed since the initial launch of Zia's campaign.

Most feminist analysts like Ayesha Jalal, Fauzia Gardezi and Anita M. Weiss credit Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization of Pakistan's laws with the formation of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) and with the consolidation of the disparate feminist movements of the 1970's in favour of a feminist campaign geared towards the re-definition of women's rights as universal human rights. I will discuss this particular move and its impact shortly. The feminist movement in Pakistan has yet to address the issue of veiling and segregation. Even when Zia-ul-Haq made it compulsory for women appearing on public

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<sup>37</sup> By choosing to analyze literary and cultural texts by authors and feminists from the monolithic category "East" or the "Third World" I take the risk of either being called the "organic intellectual" or the "doorkeeper" for these texts. I am acutely aware of the irony and the instinct to "museumize" a culture "left behind". In her "Translator's Preface" to *Imaginary Maps*, Gayatri Spivak grapples with these issues, and I deliberately use her terms to signal my own awareness of my location, my own niche. Spivak makes transparent the processes of translation—choosing specific texts and authors to translate, making specific decisions about which aspects of a text to highlight, keeping a specific audience (Western) in mind when translating, as well as the problematic of linguistic imperialism (translating from a twice colonized language into the language of the colonizer). She deconstructs the "US" and "India" by focusing on Devi's work; I hope to deconstruct "North America" and "Muslim" by focusing on the veil and Pakistan, even though I do not translate.

media to cover their heads, the actual directive and its impact was ignored by feminists and activists, so much so that most political analysts discussing the Zia regime mention the directive only in passing. As I unpack the dictatorship's Islamization campaign, I attempt to address why feminists choose to ignore the "problem" of purdah and seclusion. I begin first with an account of Zia-ul-Haq's bloodless coup, and then move on to a discussion of his Islamization campaign and the changes he brought about in Pakistan's constitution and laws before moving on to a discussion of the impact of those changes on women's lives, and literary and cultural production in the 1980's.

#### 2.5.1 *Zia-ul-Haq's Dictatorship and Islamization of laws in Pakistan*

General Zia-ul-Haq led a coup d'état against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government in 1977, and declared himself president in 1978, after promising and then canceling elections two times (Baxter 32). As Shahid Javed Burki's analysis in his article entitled "Zia's Eleven Years" shows, Zia's coup was as much a surprise to Bhutto's government as it was to the rest of the country. The months leading up to the coup had been marked by political and social unrest in Pakistan, most of it directed against Bhutto's government for "what Zia and his colleagues considered to be crimes against social values held so dear by the middle class, the *shuraafa* (the respectable citizens), of Pakistan" (Burki 8; original italics). The "social values" here refer to a brand of socialism particular to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government, one that, according to Burki, did not make appropriate concessions to the "ideology of Pakistan" (7), which in turn refers to the reason behind

the formation of the state of Pakistan—a state specifically for the Muslims of India.<sup>38</sup>

Having established himself as the president of Pakistan in 1978, “ostensibly on the expiration of Chaudhary’s<sup>39</sup> five-year term as there was no National Assembly and Senate in existence to elect a new president” (Baxter 32), Zia proceeded to implement numerous changes in laws and the constitution of Pakistan, under the banner of “Islamization of Pakistan”. His claim: Pakistan was founded as a country for all Muslims of India/South Asia and must be brought in-line with Islamic laws in order to make it a truly Islamic State. As Craig Baxter shows, however, how one defines Islam has a significant impact on the type of “Islamic State” created.

According to Baxter, Zia declared that the legal system of Pakistan would be based on *Nizam-i-Mustafa* (the Law of the Prophet), but the question of who would make the decision about what constituted “Islamic” law and even about what school of thought was to be followed remained unaddressed.<sup>40</sup> A monolithic view of Islamic jurisprudence is almost impossible, unless one chooses a singular school of thought at the cost of other, possibly contradictory, ones. With no clear definition of what constitutes a “just” or

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<sup>38</sup> There is considerable dissent among political analysts in terms of what actually is the ideology of Pakistan. Some, like Ayesha Jalal, insist that Pakistan was founded as a state for Muslims of India, a country where Islam could be practiced freely but was not to be the official religion of the state (80). Others like Shahid Burki and the religious elite of Pakistan see Pakistan as an ideal Muslim state, or a country that should be governed by “Islamic” laws (10). Zia’s regime took the latter view.

<sup>39</sup> President Fazal Elahi Chaudhary, the elected president of Pakistan during Bhutto’s terms, 1973-1978.

<sup>40</sup> According to Baxter, “Pakistan’s Muslims were divided into the two major divisions of Islam: Sunni and Shi’a. The estimates of the number of Shi’i vary widely, with figures ranging from 10 percent to 25 percent of the Muslim population. The majority of the Shi’i belong to the Ithna Ashari division, which is a state religion in Iran; a minority belong to the Ismaili branch, headed by the Agha Khan. The Sunnis of Pakistan almost universally follow the Hanafi school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. The Shi’i follow the Jafariya school, which is unique to the Shi’i” (36).

“Islamic” state<sup>41</sup>, scholars have offered their own descriptions and definitions, most of which have historically contradicted one another. Thus, General Zia’s definition of, and attempt at establishing, an ideal “Islamic” state met with resistance and protests,<sup>42</sup> with no real consensus as to what was meant by “Islamic”.

General Zia-ul-Haq remained in power for eleven years from 1977 to 1988, when he was killed in a plane crash near the central Punjab city of Bahawalpur (Burki 1). Critics like Izzud-Din Pal divide his eleven year reign into three phases. According to Pal, the first phase lasted from 1977 to 1985 during which he ruled as the sole leader, consolidating his power through religious justifications. The second phase lasted from 1985 to 1988, with partial democracy, an elected Prime Minister (Muhammad Khan Junejo)—who, according to Kamal Azfar, “had a will of his own” (71)<sup>43</sup>—and Zia as President of the country. The third phase began in May 1988, when he dissolved the elected government of Prime Minister Junejo (Pal 449). The crash of General Zia’s C-130 in August 1988 ended the eleven year dictatorship, which had been marked by the increased involvement of Pakistan in Afghanistan’s war against the Russian invasion, an

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<sup>41</sup> In his article “Politics of Islamisation: Pakistan’s Dilemma (1947-1988)” Sukhwant S. Bindra shows that, as a religion and as a system of rules about spirituality as well as one’s role in “life” Islam “aims at striking a balance between the units and the whole, between the individual and the community” (124) but “has [in] no way systematically, and in a scientific manner described, analysed and discussed the concept of the state” (124).

<sup>42</sup> The impact of a unilateral vision of Islam as imposed by Zia-ul-Haq has been discussed in Anthony Hyman, Muhammed Ghayur and Naresh Kaushik’s book, *Pakistan: Zia and After*, which shows that Zia’s Islamization program was first challenged by the “Twelver (or Imami) Shias” (49) who converged on the city of Islamabad in 1980 to protest against the imposition of the “Sunni brand of Islam” (49). Zia conceded and made Shias exempt from the legal changes (Hyman 49).

<sup>43</sup> Kamal Azfar shows that Zia had hoped to control both the National and Provincial Assemblies by hand-picking the Prime Minister of Pakistan. After the elections, however, Mohammad Khan Junejo refused to be controlled by Zia, which led to three years of confrontations between the Prime Minister and Zia, resulting in the dissolution of the assemblies in May 1988 (Azfar 71) under the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Islamization program aimed at revising the laws and constitution of Pakistan to bring it in line with Islamic rules of jurisprudence, and a complete restructuring of Pakistan's political system. For the purposes of my study, I will focus on Zia's Islamization campaign, its impact on women's lives in the 1980's and its legacy in the 1990's.

In their article "Islamization and Social Policy in Pakistan: The Constitutional Crisis and the Status of Women" J. Henry Korson and Michelle Maskiell discuss the legal changes brought about by Zia's Islamization campaign and recount the impact those changes had on women in Pakistan. According to them, within days of the 1985 non-party elections,<sup>44</sup> "President Zia announced *The Revival of Constitution of 1973 Order 1985* as printed in the *Gazette of Pakistan Extraordinary*, fully a year after he claimed his proposed amendments had been 'finalized'" (Korson and Maskiel 599). The amendments effectively gave complete power to the self-appointed president, including the power to appoint and to dissolve the assemblies at will. The order also contained the amendments relevant to social and family laws, most of which were based on notions of distinct and separate gender roles in society. Under Zia, gender inequalities were institutionalized, based on the idea that men's roles were to remain public ones, while women were to be confined to the home and its four walls. Government directives targeting women's dress were issued to schools, colleges and government offices in 1980

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<sup>44</sup> Non-party elections were held in March 1985, and have been considered to be the most fair and unbiased compared to previous elections held in Pakistan (Korson and Maskiell 598).

and beyond; “women were to be forced to wear a *chador*<sup>45</sup> over whatever they were wearing, and cover their heads” (Shaheed and Mumtaz 77). The most significant and visible impact of this directive was on female newscasters, announcers and presenters appearing on government controlled television. According to Kothari, during Zia’s Islamization campaign

[s]portswomen were not allowed to participate in international events, nor compete against men or perform in front of a mixed audience. Women’s clothing became an important issue since female visibility was equated with obscenity. Women were banned from appearing in television commercials unless the advertised product was for domestic use (detergents, sewing machines, etc.). Film actresses could not be photographed for the print media. All women who appeared on television and other media had to wear the national high-collared dress, and a dupatta (scarf) or chadar (shawl) over their heads. (291)

Even though most women, especially those in all-women government colleges, resisted the directive silently (by refusing to wear the veil), those appearing on television and working as teachers and academics in government schools and colleges and in other government offices risked losing their jobs. A section of “progressive-minded intellectual males” (Shaheed and Mumtaz 78) has argued that matters of women’s dress and the veil are unimportant to the women’s movement, and should be set aside in favour of more pressing matters like women’s economic and social rights. Such a stance ignores the

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<sup>45</sup> A thick bolt of fabric worn over the head and shoulders. It is considered to be different from the dupatta, which is usually made of diaphanous material, and usually matches the two-piece kameez-shalwar, the national dress of Pakistan.

deep-seated misogyny inherent in the government directive, as well as the impact of restricting the mobility of women. It is this misogyny that is reflected in the legislation of specific laws that curtailed women's rights in the 1980's and 1990's, all of which operated under the government's "chador aur chardewari" policy in regards to women.

The laws that have received the most attention when discussing women's rights and Pakistan's legal system were first enforced by General Zia in 1979 as the martial law administrator of Pakistan. The three areas of legislation, according to Izzud-Din Pal are: "(1) The Haddoo Laws of 1979, (2) The amendments to the Law of Evidence, 1984, and (3) The draft ordinance on Qisas and Diyat" (459) all of which attempt to establish an Islamic atmosphere in the country by implementing medieval interpretations of Islamic rules of jurisprudence. The Haddoo Laws of 1979, for example, contain four ordinances concerning the prohibition of alcohol consumption, adultery, slander and theft with specific punishments meted out for each offense including stoning to death (for adultery), whipping and cutting off of limbs (for slander and theft). Literally, the word *haddoo* (plural of *hadd*) is translated as limits, and according to Niaz A. Shah, the singular *hadd*, means cases where punishments are fixed or described by the Quran and/or the *sunnah*, the traditions of the Prophet Mohammad (Shah 127). Shah shows that prior to the introduction and implementation of the Haddoo Ordinances, the crime of adultery and rape was, according to the constitution, an offense for men alone, punishable by transportation for life or imprisonment (127). Marital rape was an offence, punishable with imprisonment for two years. Adultery was a crime, but sex between two consenting adults albeit unmarried was not a legal offence. Adultery was punishable by imprisonment for five years or a fine or both and only the husband of an adulteress could

make the complaint of adultery, with the prosecution given the right to drop the charges. The woman partner to adultery could not be punished for adultery, but also could not bring charges against her partner (Shah 127-128). The Hadood Ordinances changed these particular laws significantly.

Weiss, in “Women’s Position in Pakistan: Sociocultural effects of Islamicization,” shows that the portion of the Hadood Laws having the most significant impact on women is the one concerning adultery or “*zina*”. She shows that the state re-defined *zina* as the willful engagement in sexual intercourse on the part of a (sane) man and (sane) woman without being legally married (870). Another part of the ordinance covers the question of *zina-bil-jabr* or rape. According to Weiss, the burden of “evidence for *zina-bil-jabr* remains the same as for any other *hadd* crime: the severest punishment (death by stoning or 100 lashes) is invoked with either the accused's self-confession or by the testimony of four *salah* (morally upright) adult Muslim males. Without such evidence, the penalty is at the court's discretion” (870; original italics). According to Niaz Shah, under the Hadood Ordinance, “a woman can be charged for the offence of rape and rape of a wife is not an offence” (129). The interpretation of the laws during the 1980’s and 1990’s has been extremely problematic. Given the loopholes of the ordinance, if a woman is raped, and if she reports that rape, she has to prove at the investigation as well as at the trial that she was not a consenting party to the act of intercourse. If she does not report the matter, and becomes pregnant, she can be killed for defiling family honour, or convicted for *zina*, because courts consider conception to be a confession of adulterous sex. Thus, victims of rape are forced to defend themselves from prosecution, instead of being protected under the laws (Shah 132). It is important to note the underlying assumption behind the



implementation of the “zina” loophole: the idea that a woman is “dispensable” allows the continuing use of rape as a political weapon, especially since a raped woman cannot bring legal charges against her rapist/s. Families engaged in feuds consistently use rape to “subdue” or “attack” rival families. Rape of a woman defiles an entire family’s—even an entire community’s—honour.<sup>46</sup>

Shahnaz Khan, among other feminist scholars, has shown the impact of this particular loophole—an accusation of rape without proper evidence or witnesses has repeatedly been taken as an admission of sex outside marriage and the victim of rape is consistently charged with adultery and punished accordingly. According to Shahnaz Khan’s explication, with the introduction and legislation of the Haddood Ordinances, the crime of “fornication and adultery became a crime against the state as opposed to individual husbands, fathers or other men” (S. Khan 8). The legal definition of zina according to the Haddood Ordinances “blurs the lines between adultery, fornication and rape” (S. Khan 8), resting the distinction on the unquantifiable question of consent during intercourse. Thus, a woman who lays the charge of rape against her attacker must prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that intercourse was non-consensual. If she cannot prove coercion, “the victim becomes an offender who has enjoyed illicit sexual activity” (S. Khan 9), and can thus be charged and punished according to the penal code governing fornication and/or adultery. While analyzing the Haddood ordinance, Ayesha Jalal is careful to point out that even though “the Haddood Ordinance is in principle a threat to all

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<sup>46</sup> For detailed discussion of rape and honour see Urvashi Butalia’s account of violence against women during partition riots. Also see Anwer H. Jafri’s *Honor Killing: Dilemma, Ritual, Understanding*.

Pakistani women, those belonging to middle and upper class families are less likely to suffer its consequences” (102) in part because of the high value placed on the notion of izzat or honour that is protected at all costs, but any interference from the state is deemed unnecessary (Jalal 102). Anita Weiss, Shahnaz Khan, Farida Shaheed and Asma Jehangir<sup>47</sup> along with numerous other scholars and activists have recorded several cases in which women have been publicly flogged, incarcerated and even stoned for reporting rape and then failing to provide the mandatory four (pious) male witnesses. Weiss shows that “it is nearly impossible to prove a man's guilt without his verbal confession, for what four *salah* [righteous or pious] Muslim men would stand by and let a woman get raped?” (“Women’s Position” 870), a caveat that has been ignored in most rape/adultery cases since the Haddood Ordinance was ratified in 1984. In most cases, the rape victim is punished while the rapist/s walk/s free. The promulgation of the zina law, then, highlights the “chador aur chardewari” principle in a semantic twist. Since a woman’s true place is within the confines of her father’s and her husband’s home, rape of a woman found outside the confines of her own home is justified by the assumption that the woman is not virtuous. The problem with this formulation, however, is that most women who were charged under the zina ordinance were raped and molested by men belonging to their

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<sup>47</sup> Asma Jehangir is a prominent activist-lawyer who has consistently championed women’s rights. She is well-known for her open critique of Pakistan’s constitutional misogyny, and for her legal battles in defense of women charged under the Haddood Ordinances. She receives death-threats periodically, but continues to remain vocal about state-sanctioned misogyny. See her article “Equality Now” in *Pacific Affairs*, for her analysis of women’s rights post-Zia.

own households or their own communities.<sup>48</sup> I will address this paradox during my discussion of Shahid Nadeem's PTV drama serial *Neelay Haath*.

Another law that has proven to be significantly damaging to the question of women's equality in Pakistan is the Qanoon-e-Shahadat or the Islamic Law of Evidence, which, when combined with the Haddood Ordinance, has repeatedly been used against women reporting rape. According to this particular interpretation of the Islamic rules about who can bear witness in courts, the testimony of two women is considered to be equal to the testimony of one man, except in matters of Hadd, where according "to a very strict interpretation of this ordinance, women would be prohibited from testifying in a hadd case" (Weiss, "Women's Position" 871). The ordinance was passed by the *Majlis-e-Shoora*<sup>49</sup> and recommended to the president in 1983, following which protests broke out in Lahore and Karachi, with numerous women from diverse backgrounds protesting the interpretation of Islamic rules of bearing witness. Weiss recounts different instances from the life of the Prophet Mohammad, showing that women's testimony had been held equal to that of men's in all cases brought before the Prophet, instances that contradict the particular interpretation proposed in the Qanoon-e-Shahadat. In spite of the protests, or perhaps because of them, the "interpretation that was finally decreed on October 27, 1984, as the Law of Evidence restricts the testimony of two women being equal to that of

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<sup>48</sup> See Lisa Sharlach's article "Veil and Four Walls: A State of Terror in Pakistan" on the political use of rape as a weapon against communities and families.

<sup>49</sup> *majlis-e-shoora* (assembly or parliament), was an appointed advisory body that effectively replaced the elected National Assembly during Zia's regime (Korson and Maskiell 589). The appointment of the *majlis* (literally: gathering of scholars) with an intended membership of 300 advisors, was meant to accelerate the process of Islamization of Pakistan's constitution as well as of its social system.

one man only to financial cases; otherwise, it is left up to the discretion of the judge” (Weiss, “Women’s Position” 872).

The next set of laws that sparked protests by feminists was that of *qisas* (retribution) and *diyat* (blood money) proposed by the *Majlis-e-shoora*. According to Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, the law covers all aspects of intentional and unintentional murders, bodily injuries and abortion (110). Both the words *qisas* and *diyat* refer to the compensation offered after a murder by a murderer—*qisas* refers to retribution in the logic of an eye for an eye, and *diyat* refers to compensation in the form of blood money for murder or financial compensation for physical injury instead of retribution (Shaheed and Mumtaz 110). The original draft of the law stated that the punishment for both female and male murderers would be death by hanging, unless the family agreed to accept blood-money. In the case of an intentional murder of a woman, the money paid to the family would be half that of the amount due for a male victim. In all instances of bodily injury, the compensation for a woman victim would again be half that of a male victim (Mumtaz and Shaheed 111), the assumption being that a male member of a family contributes more to the financial well-being of that family (i.e. he is the breadwinner) than a woman. In a country where honour-killings are considered to be part of the social fabric, the implications of such a law begin to become clear. There was nothing in these ordinances that would prevent the murder of a woman. In fact, it made it financially feasible for tribes engaged in family feuds to attack the women of the opposing family, and then offer *diyat* as compensation for their loss. My discussion of *Neelay Haath* in my fourth chapter will illustrate the easy exploitation of women made possible by this particular legal amendment.

### 2.5.2 *Impact of Islamization on Women's Status in Pakistan*

Fareeda Shaheed, in her 2010 article “Contested Identities, Gendered politics” shows that the impact of changes wrought by Zia in the constitution was felt at levels far deeper in the social fabric than had been anticipated. According to her analysis, the State’s misogynistic attitudes sanctioned forms of misogyny already inherent to Pakistani social life. Her discussion shows that the series of government directives aimed at defining and re-defining “appropriate” roles women could play in the public and private spheres allowed misogynistic elements to surface in urban centers, in schools and colleges, and forced women into servility and dependence on men. According to her, during the Islamization,

[g]ender segregation was a central pillar: prohibiting joint male–female stage shows and performances in colleges, attempting to ban male gynaecologists and the autopsy of female cadavers by male doctors, stopping female athletes from competing in front of men. Encouraged by state rhetoric, some teachers refused to teach ‘improperly attired’ girls; others segregated classrooms; a few refused to teach girls at all. A government campaign against obscenity and vulgarity (a pet peeve of the religious right) managed to suggest that women per se were somehow obscene. On television women newscasters, hosts and actresses in commercials or plays had to cover their heads at all times or lose their jobs. State broadcast media extolled the virtues of the good self-sacrificing woman, domestic or domesticated, and blamed ‘other’ publicly visible women (particularly working women) for the disintegration of the family, of moral rectitude and values as well as for corruption and other social ills. An entire generation imbibed propaganda

that women's only place was in the home, their role reproduction and motherhood, their status and rights subservient to men. (859)

Thus, Zia's Islamization campaign can easily be characterized as one that encouraged deep-rooted attitudes against women to emerge and to become state policy. The debate over obscenity on television, and the government directive equating obscenity with the time women spent on screen is one example of state-sponsored misogyny. Discussed by only a select few analysts of the Zia regime, the government directive sent to Pakistan Television in 1980 "eliminated women from the commercials advertising products having 'little or no relevance to women'" (Mumtaz and Shaheed 81). A second directive forbade women to appear for more than 25 per cent of the allotted time for a commercial.

Ostensibly aimed at "protecting" the "fair sex" from exploitation, the directives underscored the state's image of the chaste, subservient housewife. According to Mumtaz and Shaheed, women's very presence in the public sphere was equated with obscenity, corruption and immorality. If women were harassed, killed or raped, in the home or on the streets, it was because women had provoked those attacks (82). The category "women" is not an undifferentiated or homogeneous one, especially in Pakistan where class and economic status regulate the impact of state policies on women in particular. As I have discussed already, class will determine whether a particular woman will be a victim or a critic of any given law or its interpretation. Fareeda Shaheed points out that "[e]xceptional women have always broken through to positions of pre-eminence across all sectors, but their presence has failed to significantly alter a structural configuration that only enables a miniscule minority to excel while condemning the majority to a life of unchanging deprivation" ("Contested Identities" 855). Jalal calls this the "convenience of

subservience” where women in positions of power will continue to make concessions to patriarchy in order to gain a foothold in the system.

Benazir Bhutto’s adoption of the white diaphanous head covering, in order to be taken seriously as a political candidate, does not come as a surprise when viewed in this particular light. The first Muslim woman to be elected as a Head-of-State, Bhutto kept her hair covered by a muslin veil which was always white throughout her political career, a gesture that allowed her to gain political legitimacy in the post-Zia era (Pigott n. pag.). In her article in *The Whig*, Catherine Pigott interviews numerous women, who protest Benazir’s concession to the veiling system (a muslin dupatta covering her hair), wondering why she needs to cover herself to pander to the religious right. The Oxford educated Bhutto, born to privilege and financial well-being, did not have any personal religious investment in the veil itself, but decided to cover her hair when it became apparent that her gender would make it difficult, if not impossible, for her to advance her political career.<sup>50</sup> Pakistani feminists’ silence about Benazir’s “strategic choice to drape the dupatta/veil on her head as a personal decision” (Zia 42) is symptomatic of feminists’ paradoxical relationship with their own personal identification as Muslims and their identity-politics as feminists. As Afiya Zia shows,

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<sup>50</sup> In her autobiography, Bhutto reveals her awareness of her status as a Muslim woman attempting to advance a political career when she discusses the familial and social pressure to marry so that she may be viewed as a reliable leader. She was constantly asked by journalists why she was not married, and she asserts that “Inherent in the question, and representative of a whole school of male thought, was the bias that there must be something wrong with a woman who wasn’t married... Instead of considering my qualifications and the party platform, the unspoken reservations were that a single woman might be too neurotic to lead the country, or too aggressive, or too timid” (306). In these ruminations, she leaves her decision to adopt the muslin veil unaddressed, but her concern about her gender, her single, un-married status, also signals her concerns about being taken seriously as a political leader first, a woman second. By agreeing to an arranged marriage, and by adopting the dupatta to cover her head in public, Benazir attempted to direct attention away from her gender.

[m]ore than political stands, it was personal identity politics that often stumped the debate within the [women's] movement. Over the years, this has included issues such as membership [in the WAF] for polygamous wives, relationship with Benazir Bhutto as a woman PM, misuse of organizational identity for legitimacy or even whether a protest should be temporarily interrupted because of the Azaan (call to prayer). (42)

This failure on the part of Pakistani feminists to resolve the tension between religious rules of behavior and political activism results in the reduction of the veil to a simplistic article of clothing, adopted only when necessary, by women belonging to the privileged strata of Pakistani society. However, the veil and segregation is yet another level of oppression for women who rely heavily on the ability to traverse the border between the protection of the domestic space and the more “dangerous” public space safely, without fear of harassment and attack, in order to support themselves and their families financially.

The formation of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) by “daughters and granddaughters of the women who participated in the Pakistan Movement” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 75) in 1981 as the impact of the Hadood Ordinance began to be felt is an example of the class divisions governing the feminist movement in Pakistan. The women and organizations that formed the WAF all belonged to the middle and upper-class sections of urban centers, speaking on behalf of the women of Pakistan. Mumtaz and Shaheed point out that “the repercussions of the Hadood Ordinance, in the shape of criminal cases, imprisonment and floggings, have not been felt in the upper classes at all but amongst the poor rural, and urban lower-middle and working classes. Yet the



perception of the discriminatory nature of the laws and the need to mount resistance came from the professional women in the urban centres” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 75). Thus, the very question of women’s status in Pakistan becomes a contested one as social, economic and class differences are taken into account. The fact that it is the socially privileged classes that focus on the question of women’s rights and status in Pakistan explains in part the reason for the focus on developmental issues rather than the complete rejection of social norms and mores—the veil and seclusion—that restrict women’s full participation in the labour market, for they benefit directly from the practice of seclusion and veiling. There are studies on women’s lack of access to public amenities, on legal, constitutional reforms that impinge on women’s rights,<sup>51</sup> but hardly anyone concerns herself with the issue of the zenana and the veil. I argue, however, that a nuanced understanding of the purdah system and its impact on women’s lived realities in Pakistan is crucial before other forms of oppression can be successfully challenged.

While discussing the impact of Zia’s Islamization pogrom on television, for example, Shuchi Kothari suggests that the main concern for “the women’s movement in Pakistan has been whether the struggle against patriarchy should be waged within an Islamic framework or not. Some women argue for a movement in opposition to Islamic discourse, while others do not reject Islam outright, but contend that women’s rights should be based on a secular notion of human rights” (291). Since there is no doubt that a

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<sup>51</sup> See work by Sadaf Ahmad, Shahla Haeri, Sabeeha Hafeez and studies by Human Rights Watch and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

form of veil has been prescribed in the Quran,<sup>52</sup> and that women have been characterized as “*fitna*” (the Arabic word connotes secession or anarchy), the problem for Pakistani feminism becomes particularly complex. Any protest against the veil, or a demand for equal rights that could potentially be seen as “western” is seen as anti-Islamic and, given Pakistan’s national identity as Islamic, distinctly anti-Pakistan. As Amina Jamal warns, however, in her essay “Feminist ‘Selves’ and Feminism’s ‘Others’” the categories of “Islamic” and “secular” feminism are contested ones, for the unquestioned use of such categories runs the risk of re-establishing orientalist readings of “Islam” (read: fundamentalist, traditional) as opposed to a monolithic “West” (read: global, modern) (Jamal 53). It is far more productive to engage in “historically grounded scholarship which can highlight the fact that Islam itself has always been a contested terrain” (Toor “Moral Regulation” 256) which in turn also helps complicate the categorization of any political claim that questions religious dogma (like the veiling system) as secular and “Western.” My focus on the decade following General Zia’s dictatorship, and on the literary and cultural representation of the veiling system, helps nuance these categories.

According to Kothari, “The idea of woman as a *femme fatale* that makes men lose control over themselves and therefore must be made invisible from the public’s male gaze is central to the rationale for *pardah* [...]” (292). In spite of Zia’s “dupatta policy” of the 1980’s and its revival in the 1990’s by Sharif’s government, there has been no extended study of the impact of this policy on social realities of Pakistani women.

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<sup>52</sup> All scholars agree that Muslim women have been told to veil themselves, to hide their beauty. The debate surrounding the veil, then, concerns itself with how much of the body is to be veiled.

Kothari's interviews with Pakistani women suggest that government policies are critiqued, challenged and questioned vigorously, but there seems to be no real or perceived need for a public protest. In a state where mere survival is at stake for a woman due to the Haddood ordinance, Islamic and feudal control over lives (and dress codes) become less of a concern. However, as my analysis of the veil in Pakistani literature will show, the question of the "chador aur chardewari"—the veil and the home—forms the foundation of the misogynistic legal directives and social injustices that feminists are attempting to challenge.

## 2.6 The Veil in Islam: Religious and Cultural Practice

In her now canonical text, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*, Fatima Mernissi provides important historical and philosophical contexts for the Muslim practice of veiling and seclusion. She focuses almost exclusively on Moroccan women. Mernissi acknowledges her culturally specific analysis, only to claim that her conclusions about the veil can easily be applied to all Muslim cultures across the globe. For Mernissi, "Muslims" becomes a singular category of analysis, and socio-cultural differences are elided far too easily. It is difficult to accept her universalizing claim that all Muslims, regardless of their geographical and historical differences, behave a certain way. Islam may act as a unifying force in diasporic settings, but differences in interpretation and practice abound. Even though all Muslim women veil themselves (the degree and type of veil adopted varies significantly) and the practice can be seen as one that unites women across cultural and geographical boundaries, a general claim for (or against, in Mernissi's case) the necessity of veiling and segregation only results in highlighting the differences rather than eliminating them.

In as much as her methodology poses specific problems, her historically oriented chapter on space entitled “The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries,” reprinted in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (2003) provides important historical analysis of the reasoning behind the separation of male and female space in Muslim culture. According to Mernissi, male and female spaces are specifically delineated by the religion, with formal regulations in place to govern the boundaries between the two. She asserts that “[m]uslim sexuality is territorial: its regulatory mechanisms consist primarily in a strict allocation of space to each sex and an elaborate ritual for resolving the contradictions arising from the inevitable intersections of spaces” (490). According to her, Muslim society is divided strictly into two clear “subuniverses: the universe of men (the *umma*, the world of religion and power) and the universe of women, the domestic world of sexuality and the family” (490). For her, the strict spatial division reflects the clear distinction between those who hold power (men) and those who do not (women). Wearing the veil in order to render the female body invisible, thus, becomes a way of traversing the spatial boundaries between male and female space, a way of removing sexuality from the public domain. For Mernissi, the designated, strictly regulated female space (harem<sup>53</sup> in Arab cultures, zenana in South Asia) remains particularly problematic for the restrictions it places on women’s access to education, jobs and other amenities. It is this regulation of male and female interactions and the strict division of space, both

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<sup>53</sup> Mernissi uses the example of Middle-eastern harems that were sections of palaces devoted specifically to the use of a monarch’s multiple wives and their entourage. South Asian zenanas are modeled on those harems.

public and private, that became the foundation for the governmental directives that defined the Zia regime in Pakistan.

As has been discussed already, the 1980's saw the creation of numerous laws and regulations distinctly discriminatory against women (Jalal 107) all of which were justified on the basis of the Islamization of the nation. The switch from the repressive dictatorship to a democratic system under the ministership of Benazir Bhutto would presumably have been fortuitous for the feminist cause in Pakistan. However, as Jalal shows, "gender issues are not a priority for the members of the...parliament" (107). Jalal lays the blame for this lack of interest on the doors of a disunited feminist movement in Pakistan, which is divided along class, economic, ethnic and religious lines, instead of recognizing the intersections between religious injunctions for spatial organization and the cultural interpretations of those injunctions, both of which create a restricted space designed specifically for women, one that seems to make a woman's body the architectural foundation for a religiously just society. This also makes it almost impossible for women to challenge Zia's call to restrict women to the veil and the domestic space.

Nasra M. Shah shows that "[p]urdah, which is deeply rooted in Muslim theology and religion, involves two fundamental practices: the wearing of the veil (burqa or chador), and the physical segregation of the sexes outside the household" (32). The practice of purdah is intended to establish a physical barrier between men and women. Purdah refers to a curtain designed to conceal women's (i.e. religious) space from men's (semi-religious). The same practice is encapsulated in the Arabic word hijab. Even though the linguistic and cultural nuances of both hijab and purdah are different, both

words encapsulate the same idea—that of women’s veiling practices (wearing of hijab and going into purdah) described by the word for architectural barriers or curtains. In her essay “The Hijab: how a curtain became an institution and a cultural symbol” Barbara F. Stowasser shows that the

Hijab is anything by which something or someone is veiled, hidden, screened off, or separated; hijab is anything that intervenes or comes in-between. In semantic terms, then, the first meaning of hijab as ‘barrier’ includes both the objective limitation of space (the mark of a border or threshold or of a separation) and also the subjective perception of that limit (the veiling of an object, that is, how it is removed from view)... (87-88)

Stowasser also shows that there are seven instances in the Quran in which the word hijab is used and concludes that a “shared semantic theme of most of the meanings of hijab is the concept of ‘separation’, most commonly in the sense of a (desirable) protection or an (undesirable) obstacle, which is either concrete, metaphorical, or abstract” (89). She shows that the hymen is also referred to as “hijab al-bukurriya” which reinforces the meaning/connotation of hijab as (sexual) barrier. Her extensive historical research leads her to conclude that even though the literal meaning of the word and its use in the Quran connotes a concrete object (curtain, partition, screen), the use of the word in Hadith<sup>54</sup> [traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad] evolved to mean both: the literal curtain as well as the metaphoric and symbolic barrier presented in the form of the hijab, or the burqa. She also draws a semantic connection between the word hijab, and the

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<sup>54</sup> Hadith are used by scholars as explications and practical applications of Quranic injunctions.

jilbab—Arabic women’s clothing which resembles the burqa—which further explains, according to Stowasser, the current use of the word hijab to denote women’s veiling practices. Since the Urdu word purdah also refers to both the literal curtain segregating a household as well as the veil itself, I apply Stowasser’s explanation for the evolution of the hijab from barrier to women’s veil, to the use of purdah in Pakistan.

The barrier, the curtain, here appears to be flimsy and ethereal, but is concrete and unconquerable, just like the burqa or the headscarf that is a simple length of fabric invested with a multitude of complex socio-historical and religious connotations. The veiled Muslim woman’s body is generally viewed by scholars of the veil as one in which the woman is present, but always absent, always ignored, and yet also always desired as a sexual object. The space she occupies is impenetrable, but because it operates on the principle of mobility, it becomes a source of anxiety for the male observer. In this strict focus on the fabric veil itself, the woman’s body, the living breathing person under the veil is forgotten, and the veil itself becomes the object invoking desire and anxiety. Frantz Fanon, for example, shows that the veil is the most prominent article of clothing noticed by the (male) tourist to a Muslim country—Algeria in his case. According to Fanon, “[o]ne may remain for a long time unaware of the fact that a Moslem does not eat pork or that he denies himself daily sexual relations during the month of Ramadan, but the veil worn by the women appears with such constancy that it generally suffices to characterize Arab society” (Fanon 35). The colonial enterprise, then, focuses on the Islamic veil to show or to prove the need for “enlightenment”. Instead of recognizing the system of values as a form of resistance to the colonizer’s attempts to dominate, the colonizer attributes those values to “religious, magical, fanatical behaviour” (Fanon 41)

that must be altered and brought in line with the colonizer's system of values. The veiled woman, then, must be unveiled to reveal the fantastic beauty, "bar[e] her secret, break[...] her resistance, mak[e] her available for adventure. Hiding the face is also disguising a secret; it is also creating a world of mystery, of the hidden" (Fanon 43).<sup>55</sup> The veiled woman sees without being seen, she does not yield herself, which, in turn, is a disturbing twist of the power dynamics in a colonized culture. The colonizer must dominate, must overpower, but cannot dominate what he cannot see, attain or reach. This particular reaction to the veil removes it from the realm of mere article of clothing and invests it with specific psychological and emotional consequences that are removed even from religious dogma. It creates an image of the Muslim woman as a self-contained, unconquerable object of desire, a package that must be unwrapped to reveal all its hidden secrets.

Disturbing as it may be in terms of the reactions it invokes, the veil also creates a barrier and obstructs the gaze of the observer, creating an enclosure, a feminine space, from which a woman can claim her rights to the public sphere. I read this particular created space as an interstitial, third space. Homi K. Bhabha, in his writings about the Rushdie affair<sup>56</sup> and his introduction to his collection *The Location of Culture*, discusses the notion of the hybrid third space, or interstitial space, one that is in-between two (or

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<sup>55</sup> Strangely, these same rhetorical arguments have been used in the Canadian parliament to justify the banning of the niqab during citizenship oath-taking ceremonies. See the Editorial in *Toronto Star*, "Citizenship Veil Ban Coerces Women to Fit into the Mainstream".

<sup>56</sup> The Rushdie Affair refers to the banning of Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses*, and the fatwa (religious declaration) demanding Rushdie's death by Muslim clergy. Bhabha discusses the novel in "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation" and the reaction to the novel in "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation".



more) identities, cultural affiliations, religious identities etc. Such an in-between identity is neither one nor the other, but a hybrid of the two, an uncomfortable reconciliation of often conflicting demands on loyalties. This interstitial identity pays close attention to the conflicting nature of the hybridization of identities and is a conscious process, reminiscent of Gloria Anzaldua's "*la mestizaje*". Where Bhabha's conceptualization does not take into account gender and class dynamics, Anzaldua not only deals with racial "mixing" but does so in a specifically feminist consciousness, where she claims that "mestiza" women must make their own space, deal with their own architecture (Anzaldua 44).

Both Anzaldua and Bhabha celebrate the "borderland", which, for Anzaldua, is a space that is always in flux, one that is specifically feminist. Borderland for Bhabha is a possibly liberating, but intrinsically transitional space. Anzaldua sees the borderlands as a conscious effort to reconcile her multiple, often contradictory, identifications, as a space that enables a critique of patriarchy with the formulation of a specifically feminist cultural architecture. As Ambreen Hai points out, "being a border zone or a boundary can be difficult, but also enabling the inscription of a limit that yet poses the possibility of transgression, and novelty...the crossing of borders can be a form of transgression, resistance, and subject-formation, and the inhabiting of borders a difficult but productively destabilizing political endeavor" (382). I view Pakistani feminists' adoption of the veil—to transgress the border between public and private, as well as to formulate a new space, an interstitial "borderland" symbolized by the veil—as an attempt to use the borderlands, the interstitiality, for their own political and social gain. This suggestion presumes a conscious politic on the part of the woman who wears the veil, a

consciousness that has not been articulated, but one that has been attempted by artists and writers, as my discussion of Kermani's video will show shortly.

While using Bhabha's and Anzaldua's conceptualizations of third space, interstitial identity and borderlands, I am wary of consolidating the idea as a new category of analysis. If I make the borderlands into a concept to be applied uncritically I land on a very slippery slope with questions about belonging: who or what belongs in the third space? The questions about belonging, about who is hybrid and who is not, do a disservice to the slipperiness of the term itself imbedded in Bhabha's analysis and Anzaldua's delineation of the borderlands. I thus proceed with caution: I posit that the Pakistani burqa and the practice of purdah creates an interstitial third space for Pakistani women, one that allows them to bring their interior world with them while laying claim to the public space, yet also carrying the risk of bringing the "outside" into the "folds" of the new third space. By using the term interstitiality I wish to highlight the complexity of this portable "closet": it is a hybrid, political tool, one that defines, not confines, a woman's access to the public sphere. It allows her to intercept the male gaze, to lay claim to her own chastity, and to occupy physical space in a male dominated "outside" world. The veil, the burqa, has the potential to be used as a politically strategic tool of negotiation and compromise, and a rigorous discussion of the politics inherent in this reading of the burqa will help expose and nuance this potential. Given the literary and artistic representations of the specific impact of veiling and segregation on women's lives—representations that I foreground in this dissertation to complicate the question of women's (lack of) agency in Pakistan—an analysis of the political potential of the burqa cannot be completely divorced from the material experience of the veil and the

segregation system. The third space created by the wearing of the burqa in public space is not without its risks and dangers—according to Bhabha’s delineation, it is a hybrid of two or more identities/identifications carrying within it the traces, the excesses of its “components”, so when we take the burqa to be a “third space” we cannot help but wonder: of what exactly is it a hybrid?

The following section on Sheema Kermani’s dramatization of Fehmida Riaz’s feminist poetry helps illustrate, even complicate, the interstitial space created by specific architectural features and the veil in a Pakistani context. As will become clear through the following analysis, Pakistani feminists continue to grapple with patriarchal, institutionalized and familial structures of power and control over women’s lives. Some, like Kermani, even use the veil as a symbol of that oppression, but cannot bring themselves to reject the veil itself completely, for it helps signal chastity and virtue—a signaling that legitimizes women’s claims to power. The portable closet (the burqa, the veil) can be a liberating tool, as my discussion of Kermani’s video will show, in spite of the veil’s material history that I have outlined so far.

## 2.7 Sheema Kermani’s “Aseer Shahzadi”: Feminists’ Compromise Illustrated

One of the questions I set out to answer is whether the space created by the enveloping folds of the burqa—and by extension, of the chador and the dupatta that act as its representative—is similar to the sacred, sanctified space of the zenana itself. If the folds of the burqa create a portable closet, one that is a hybrid, interstitial space, then is it truly an imprisoning, restrictive space, or can it be used to liberate women? By comparing the folds of the burqa to the walls of the zenana, I signal a link between an

essentially architectural enclosure and the Muslim veil, a link that is literalized, and then exploited by Sheema Kermani. She is a prominent theatre personality, activist and the co-founder of the feminist theatre group Tehrik-e-Niswan (Women's Movement) based in Karachi, Pakistan which uses the performing arts: theatre, dance, video and television, in order to create awareness of the multiple issues facing women of Pakistan. Through her theatre group, Kermani has staged numerous plays and dance performances highlighting the challenges faced by women in Pakistani society, including issues of veiling and segregation as well as violence against women. In her music video entitled "Aseer Shahzadi" [Imprisoned Princess], which is based on Fahmida Riaz's poem, "Aik larki se" [To a girl]<sup>57</sup> Kermani links the veiling and segregation system to architectural features—latticed windows, partially veiled doorways, thresholds guarded by reptiles. The images of veiled, gagged and bound women are used in the video to suggest that there are, indeed, intrinsic connections between the veil and the zenana's spatiality, and that the veil itself represents the oppressiveness of Pakistani patriarchy, a radical conclusion, given the Pakistani (social and ideological) investment in a woman's chastity and the wearing of a veil. The video's succession of images, its mise-en-scene, and its conclusion (which differs significantly from the conclusion of Riaz's poem), imply that the veil is a representation of all the patriarchal forces that seek to subjugate women in Pakistan. The video identifies specific institutions—dowry murders, honour killings, deliberate incarceration of women based on trumped up cases of insanity—that imprison women, institutions that can only be challenged by unveiled, young pre-adolescent girls,

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<sup>57</sup> See Appendix B for a translation of the complete poem.

a note that is missing from the original poem. The veiling and segregation system is identified with the patriarchal institutions that imprison women, but is left unchallenged—women continue to wear the dupatta at the end of the video, even when they are unbound from other “traditions”. This implied connection between the segregation system, and patriarchal oppression leaves the fabric veil itself unproblematized, for all adult women continue to wear the veil, even when freed. Kermani questions and challenges patriarchal oppression, of which the veil is a symbol for her, but she does not acknowledge the veil’s intrinsic power over a woman’s body and her mobility. The ending of the video advocates a complete rejection of the zenana itself, without rejecting the veil, a note that is not present in the original poem.

Both the poem and the video suggest that Pakistani women have been, and continue to be, silenced and imprisoned by old, outdated customs and traditions. Of these, veiling, for Kermani, is the predominant institution that needs to be challenged, but Riaz’s poem only mentions “ancient traditions”, never singling out or naming a specific force that could, or does, subjugate women in Pakistan. Kermani’s dramatization of the poem, while remaining faithful to the rhythm of its words, re-orders and, in the process, completely alters, the main thrust of Riaz’s poem. This re-organization, I argue, says as much about Kermani’s brand of feminism and her own feminist agenda as about the changes necessary for a performance of a short poem. An exploration of the specific images presented in Fahmida Riaz’s poem will help contextualize the changes made by Kermani during her performance. Kermani re-orders and restructures the Riaz poem specifically to assert that women are imprisoned by the veiling and segregation system which works as a shroud, a mask, covering up patriarchal oppressions—honour killings

and dowry killings among other “institutions” identified within the music video. Kermani ends the video on an optimistic note, like Riaz, but where Riaz insists that women can free themselves, Kermani shows young, pre-adolescent girls as the saviours of the imprisoned princess. Kermani’s focus on pre-adolescent girls is a gesture towards the moment in a Pakistani girl’s life when it becomes mandatory for her to don the veil when in public, suggesting that the donning of the veil as an adolescent robs women of the power to resist patriarchal oppression. I will discuss this problematic in detail during my discussion of the images presented in the video. Before I address those images, however, it is important to focus on Riaz’s poem.

Fahmida Riaz is a celebrated Urdu poet who started the first women's publishing house in Pakistan, which also published a magazine, *Awaaz [Voice]* during General Zia-ul-Haq’s Martial Law regime (1977-1988). Because of the magazine’s outspokenness, “fourteen court cases of sedition were filed against the magazine, one of which (under section 114 A) carried a death penalty. She escaped to India whilst on bail, with her husband and two children, where she lived for seven years” (R. Ahmad 23). She returned to Pakistan after democracy was restored, and “served as Director General of Pakistan’s National Book Council in Islamabad when Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party was in power” (R. Ahmad 23). She has published two collections of prose, numerous collections of poetry, and a book of 'prose poems'. Her book *Badan Dareeda* [Body Lacerated] (1974), in which “Aik larki se” [To a girl] was published, explores sensual and overtly sexual themes, which contributed to her controversial image among the Pakistani literary establishment.

One of the drawbacks of writing about, and critiquing, Urdu feminist poetry is the dearth of scholarship available on the topic. Although translations of Fahmida Riaz's poems have appeared in print over the last decade, there is very little work done on the specific feminist politics of poets like Fahmida Riaz, who challenge both the traditional form (re-inventing the *ghazal*,<sup>58</sup> for example) and the idioms that have dominated Urdu poetry since its inception. Since feminist ideas are new to Urdu poetry, feminist writers, or poets writing in Urdu and expressing feminist ideas,<sup>59</sup> have required the inclusion of, and invention of images and idioms that were not part of the canon. In her study of Riaz's poetry, Amina Yaqin, in her essay "The Body Torn" shows that women participating in public *mushairas*<sup>60</sup>—the pre-dominant forums through which new Urdu poetry is disseminated—were invariably reduced to their bodies. Men's comments focus on the poet as performer, belittling women and their poetic talent (Yaqin 237). Yaqin discusses some of Riaz's poems in her essay, and shows that Riaz portrays specific types of women, who, according to Yaqin, are vocal, sexual women, the opposite of the traditional portrayal of women as sexless, voiceless objects and subjects of love poetry (240). In general, Urdu poetic conventions, according to Neluka Silva "did not provide a space for

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<sup>58</sup> A ghazal is a short Urdu poem, with a strict rhyme scheme and structure, similar to the English sonnet. The images dominating the ghazal are the unrequited lover, an unfeeling beloved, and the saqi (winegiver) among others. Traditionally, the ghazal constructs an image of a cold unfeeling beloved, making women the subject and object of love poetry.

<sup>59</sup> Some Urdu poets, like Parveen Shakir, have been very careful about avoiding the label "feminist" to describe their poetry, and insist on being "just poets".

<sup>60</sup> Mushaira is a public gathering of poets. The word is derived from the Urdu "shair" or verse couplet. There are specific rules governing a mushaira.

women's issues. Thus feminist Urdu poetry...is a radical gesture" (207) of which Riaz's poetry is an exemplum.

Riaz changes the dominating idiom of the *ghazal* to infuse it with a distinctively feminist, political, perspective, one that introduces "unconventional punctuation and capitalization and reworking of the stock images associated with femininity, such as flowers, jewels and blood" (Silva 208). In "Aik larki se" Riaz avoids punctuation completely, and adopts free verse, which adds to the breathless quality of the poem. The short lines of the poem follow an internal rhyme, beginning with a slow staccato rhythm which increases as the poem moves into the possibility of freedom for the imprisoned princess.<sup>61</sup>

The poem begins with an image of a crumbling building, built out of ancient, tortuous customs that oppress and subjugate women. The first verse of the poem constructs an image of a house of ancient customs that has gaping brickwork and a sagging roof, one that totters under its own weight, unable to sustain itself. Even though the customs and traditions that subjugate women continue to exist, they can self-destruct, for even the walls of the building, the entire structure is "ashamed of itself" and "trembles under its own weight". In spite of its decaying aspect, the "house of cruel customs" manages to oppress and suppress women. The second stanza repeats the first two lines of the opening stanza and moves into a description of what is contained within the building of cruel customs—an intoxicated voice, a bold dance which can potentially break the

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<sup>61</sup> See Appendix B for translations of the poem. Patricia L. Sharpe has published a translation of the poem in the collection *Four Walls and a Black Veil*, but the translation reads more like an interpretation of the ideas of the poem. I have chosen to render a more literal translation to demonstrate the short staccato rhythm of its images and form.



building down, setting the imprisoned princess free. The building can crumble only if the imprisoned woman, born of oppression and silence, can learn to sing and dance, to recognize the power inherent in her own body. The focus of the poem shifts from the building to the imprisoned woman who has power by virtue of her creativity.

The lines that proclaim the possibility of freedom and the destruction of the building are the longest lines of the poem, adding to the building crescendo of the rhythm. The next stanza describes the imprisoned princess, who is, according to the poet, the “daughter of grief and terror”, the “mother of weakness and despair” who will breathe fearlessly and freely once she is free of the bonds of cruel traditions. The final stanza addresses the reader directly, telling her that it is she who is the living, breathing woman/wife whose body is a flame, whose soul is tempered steel. Riaz constructs the image of women who are powerful and yet creative simultaneously, capable of nurturing and loving at the same time as supporting and defending. A woman, according to Riaz, knows how to love, how to nurture and how to be loved, but also to fight and to free herself from unjust imprisonment. With the building as a dominating image of the poem, Riaz is suggesting that patriarchal oppressions function as imprisoning, binding forces, forces that are inherently powerful, even though they “totter under their own weight”. Thus, for Riaz, patriarchy controls women by controlling space, and mobility, by imprisoning women, but that control can easily be challenged through song, dance and woman’s intrinsic creativity. It is woman herself—with her artistic and creative powers—who can free herself from the prison created within the walls of the house of cruel customs.

“Aik larki se” celebrates the creativity of women, the power inherent in their ability to procreate. The poem does not focus on the actual traditions that oppress women, nor does it name veiling and segregation of women as the oppressive force, but its focus on the architectural dimensions of women’s oppression—which she literalizes as the house of cruel customs—suggests a link between the zenana and women’s oppression, a hint that is picked up by Kermani’s performance. Riaz describes women as possessors of bodies of flame, souls that are tempered steel. Their real power lies in the words that they do not, but can, speak. The poem’s structure deliberately divides it onto two distinct parts, with the first focused on the structures of ancient customs that totter under their own weight, ready to come tumbling down. The second part celebrates the princess who is imprisoned by those very ancient traditions, but who can break free in a whirling, twirling dance of freedom and joy. The poem highlights women’s own power, one that is suppressed and imprisoned in the “house of cruel customs” but one that can be used to gain freedom, for woman derives her power from her own sexuality, as she is “beloved by man”.

The music video “Aseer Shahzadi” that dramatizes this poem was first broadcast in 2002, and incorporates the work of Sheema Kermani, Anwer Hussain Jafri (director) and Tina Sani (singer), all of whom are prominent feminist artists in Pakistan. Given the demands of the music video format (like a focus on presenting a visual narrative), Kermani chooses to highlight specific customs that oppress women in Pakistan, rather than leaving the “building of cruel customs” unnamed like Riaz. Her dramatization of this poem significantly alters the order of its images, omits the references to woman as lover and beloved, and ends on a hopeful note, with the refrain “she will breathe fearlessly, lost

in her intoxicated dance”. In a personal conversation with me, Kermani revealed that she made a deliberate decision to end on a hopeful note, given the choice of “music video” as the medium of her own political message of freedom from oppression. In a subsequent email exchange about the video, Kermani explained that the editing of the poem itself was done in collaboration with the video’s director, Anwer Jafri, after which, according to Kermani:

we spoke to Fahmida, got our edited version approved and discussed the singing with her. We decided to get Tina [Sani] to sing the vocal and got a young musician Faraz Anwaar to compose the music and to set the poem to the melody. He first made a rough recording in his own voice, he is a guitarist himself [sic]. Then he recorded the different tracks. This was done while we did the visualisation and dramatisation of the poem—the music had to meet the mood of the visualisation. The sound track was then finalised and then we went into the shooting of the visuals. The sound track needed many revisions along the way.

For Kermani, the music video would have been the ideal medium, through which she could reach an audience bigger than that of a theatrical production. For her, ending the video with the dance of celebration meant that the message would be a rallying call to those who were ready to make a change. According to Kermani’s email, it was important for the team to create a song that would have a social message about women’s rights. Unfortunately, the video was not played by the one TV channel she sent the video to, as often as Kermani and her team had hoped. However, it was played by most Pakistani channels to mark International Women’s Day for a number of years after its release, and continues to be played during festivals and conferences, both in Pakistan and abroad

(email interview). It is now available on YouTube<sup>62</sup> and had been viewed by more than five thousand people between the years 2008 and 2012.<sup>63</sup>

“Aseer Shahzadi” opens with establishing shots of young, eight or nine year old girls on a beach, in a flower-filled garden, and on swings, playing together happily. The music shifts into ominous notes, which signals the appearance of two veiled, hooded, figures carrying with them a black shroud-like fabric which covers the camera completely, blocking out the sun. The point-of-view shot, here, places the viewer in the same position as the young girls being enveloped by the veil, so when the black chador blocks out the sun, it does so for both the young girls and the viewer. The camera then cuts away to show a cobra crawling towards a woman enveloped in a black cloth, covered from head to toe, and struggling against it, a visual juxtaposition that suggests that the black veil, the shroud-like cloth, is the snake-like enemy waiting to ensnare girls, robbing them of their innocence, their child-like qualities. Since the two girls do not reappear in the video until the second half, Kermani’s music video is suggesting that the black shroud—generally read to represent the burqa or the Muslim veil—is an effective silencing, almost smothering, agent. As the veil blocks out the light, playthings are abandoned, and women quite literally fade into the background, while reptiles are foregrounded. The focus becomes old buildings, and the shots use selective focus to blur

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<sup>62</sup>The video is available at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPA82fWpu6w> According to M. Yasir’s article on the Pakistani Telecom and IT News Website, Pro Pakistani.com, more than 20 million users were using the Internet—be it through Broadband, Dial-up or through Mobile Internet Technology—in 2011. <<http://propakistani.pk/2011/10/27/internet-users-in-pakistan-cross-20-million-mark/>>

<sup>63</sup> According to Youtube’s statistics, the video was first uploaded to Youtube in 2008, and is most popular amongst viewers in Pakistan, with North America as a close second.

the background, where most of the action seems to be occurring. The camera pans sides of buildings, following feminine, but weathered, hands, latticed windows with women's eyes peeking through, open windows from where women rush away as the camera moves towards them. The selective focus, the close-ups of different hands and feet, the unidentified women, all suggest that femininity in Pakistan remains hidden, silenced and always in the background. Women's presence is only hinted at, setting up the veil and the segregation system as the root cause of women's oppression in Pakistan, with latticed windows, veiled doorways, thresholds guarded by scorpions and snakes as the manifestations of that segregation system, along with the burqa and the chador. The mise-en-scene of the opening sequence, thus, plays with contrast and with compositional balance, encouraging our eye to move back and forth, from foreground to background and back again. Balance and disbalance of the setting—with focus shifting from the rat in the foreground to the open threshold and the red veiled woman in the background—shapes our expectation of where significant action will take place, which is in the background, not the foreground. Usually, blurring of the background and of distant objects is used to suggest depth and distance in filmmaking, but "Aseer Shahzadi" uses the same technique to indicate that women are deliberately hidden from view. Their presence, however, cannot be ignored because our attention is drawn to them as soon as they move, even if that move is away from the camera's gaze.

As the music builds, and as the song begins to move towards the possibility of freedom for the imprisoned princess, the selective focus is racked, and the background becomes the new focus of the shot, revealing, and then lingering on the red veiled woman behind the lattice, a woman whose hair is uncovered, but whose body is veiled by a

chador. The images of different types of veils morph into images of imprisoned and abused women. This shift of narrative focus, from walls and fabric that veil to patriarchal acts that specifically suppress and imprison women, underlines the initial suggestion that the veiling and segregation system masks the subjugation of women, and establishes a link between the architectures that imprison (the lattice windows, veiled doorways) and the “institutions” that subjugate and oppress women. The video shies away from directly challenging the fabric veil, the dupatta (for example), but paradoxically, links the segregation system to the physical and emotional imprisonment of women. The veil itself, in the form of the dupatta, is celebrated within the video—the women who are freed continue to wear some form of the veil even during the dance of freedom, and the traditions that operate to oppress women based on their gender are highlighted by the latter half of the video. Since Fahmida Riaz’s poem does not directly challenge or even raise the issue of the veil, one wonders why Kermani opens her video with images of the veil, only to substitute those images with representations of women imprisoned, murdered, literally bound and gagged. It seems as if Kermani finds the segregation system—in its manifestation as zenana, burqa and chador—oppressive, but cannot bring herself to question the injunction to veil completely. By showing veiled women dancing the luddi,<sup>64</sup> Kermani’s video challenges the segregation system but not the veil.

The succession of the opening images of the video—from rodents and scorpions in the foreground, to images of girls fleeing the camera’s gaze—equate silenced women with oppression. The closing sequence in which the silenced pre-pubescent girls of the

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<sup>64</sup> The traditional dance of happiness, usually performed by women at weddings.

opening reappear to unbind the imprisoned, older, women, suggests that women can only be freed by the younger generation, not by any other forces. The bound and gagged women are helpless and mute, waiting to be rescued. The poem, on the other hand ends with an address to the reader, a stanza that has not been included in Tina Sani's (sung) rendition of the poem, which asserts that the imprisoned princess can be free because she herself is strong. The song includes some lines from the last stanza—those describing the woman's strength, her creativity and her power are dramatized within the video—but the lines proclaiming that “you are the living woman” who is “the mother of sovereignty” and “beloved by man” have been omitted from the song. Instead, the video shows little girls untying the ropes binding the heavily veiled women, who, once freed, break into the *luddi*. Kermani's restructuring of the poem, then, suggests that women who are oppressed cannot set themselves free, unless they get help from someone else. For Kermani, that “someone else” is the next generation, young enough to have escaped the “oppressive tyranny” of the veil, and to have also escaped the silent acceptance of the repressive system that sanctions violence under the guise of the veil and the four walls of a home.

The video shows pre-pubescent girls being covered up by the shroud-like veil, which is, in turn a gesture towards the Muslim injunction for veiling of adolescent girls. Before adolescence, girls in Pakistan generally go unveiled. Once veiled, girls are expected to confine themselves to the four walls of the house. Exceptions exist, of course, but the video draws the viewers' attention to the moment when the veil descends on a young girl, literally creating a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood, where childhood is associated with innocence, and freedom to play, and adulthood with patriarchal restrictions on mobility and selfhood, of which the veil is a symbol. Since the

young girls appear unveiled, dressed in skirts and t-shirts at the end of the video, the visual message here is that the veil itself is the oppressive force, but a message that is undermined by the images of the dancing women wearing the dupatta, an illustration of the paradox faced by feminists seeking emancipation for Pakistani women while simultaneously trying to balance that emancipation with respect for Islamic rules of gendered behavior. The video stops just short of claiming that the veil robs a woman of her creative powers. Instead, the video's succession of images, and its portrayal of social traditions that subjugate women suggest that the traditions can be challenged by the new generation, by young girls who should literally set their comrades free to allow women to create and to build, but all within the Islamic paradigm of modest and chaste behaviour.

Latticed windows and partial walls are flimsy structures that can, and must, be challenged by women. Both the video and the poem are suggesting that forces that subjugate women in Pakistan function precisely because women submit to them. The ending of the video forces the viewer to reconsider the image of the veiled woman as oppressed, for even the veiled woman participates in creation and building, art and dance—even the freed princess will wear the dupatta slung across her shoulders in order to lay claim to the public domain. Thus, a proclamation of freedom on the part of a woman can be made only if the challenge is to the forces that bind and subjugate. Does that necessitate an unveiling of the female body at the same time? Kermani's performance of purdah here, her celebration of dance and of art, suggests a re-veiling of sorts, instead of an unveiling, which in turn, can be read as a matter of political expediency given the "Islamic" revivalist climate of Pakistan.



The veiling system is consistently used by patriarchy to control women's mobility, and the same system is subverted in multiple ways by feminists to negotiate specific compromises around the problematic of gender segregation and access to the labour market. In trying to barter—the veil left unchallenged in exchange for access to jobs and to education—Pakistani feminists have found themselves fighting a losing battle. Kermani's work represents this compromise, and attempts to establish a framework which offers a possibility of emancipation and freedom for Pakistani women. The music video recognizes that the veil has been the site on which patriarchal violence has been constructed, the system under which abuse has been cloaked, but it also offers hope for future agency through a re-reading of the veil. The next three chapters in this dissertation will foreground texts that grapple with this very (paradoxical) relationship with the “chador aur chardewari”.

## Chapter 2

### 3 The Blasphemy of Protest: Challenging the Zenana in Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*

#### 3.1 Introduction<sup>65</sup>

Tehmina Durrani's 1998 novel, *Blasphemy*, explores the world of a Muslim Pir's (Sufi Saint) household, but focuses exclusively on the zenana, or the secluded portion of the house devoted to the use of the household's women. Located in rural Pakistan, the novel obliterates the male world from view, while a veil is deliberately lifted from the portion that is normally hidden (the zenana), by Heer, the wife of the Pir. Written in the first person, the novel takes Heer's perspective; she is married to Pir Sain, the village's Sufi leader, against her express wishes. She recounts her (mis)treatment at his hands, using a circular, spiraling storytelling method reminiscent of oral narratives. Containing stories of different women interacting with the zenana, the novel introduces a world of intense isolation, sexual abuse and religious hypocrisy. It foregrounds problems of seclusion, closeting and veiling, and attempts to highlight domestic abuse carried on under the protection of religious autonomy.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> An earlier draft of this chapter was published as "Breaking down the Walls: Challenging the Concept of Zenana in *Blasphemy*" in *Women in Dialogue: (M)uses of Culture*. Eds. Günseli Sonmez Isci, Dilek Direnc and Klara Kolinska. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. 143-158

<sup>66</sup> "Religious autonomy" refers to Pir Sain's power granted to him due to his exalted status as the direct descendant of both the Prophet Muhammad and of Babaji, the ascetic saint to whom the shrine is dedicated. Pir Sain is revered as a religious leader, but his behavior towards his wife and daughters is critiqued by Heer as non-religious, and at times as even anti-religious. However, he is granted autonomy by the state as well as by his followers which is due to his exalted religious status. I will address this issue as I discuss the novel in further detail.

The construction of the zenana within the novel is particularly complex, mediated as it is through Heer's perceptions of life in the zenana and the village as recounted to Heer by the women interacting with her. The claustrophobic world of the zenana is depicted by Heer (who continuously takes immense pains to characterize herself as the victim of patriarchal abuse) as a paradoxical refuge for women inhabiting the zenana while simultaneously imprisoning them to the physical confines of the domestic space designated for their use, inaccessible to all men except the Pir. *Blasphemy's* depiction of the zenana, as well as the burqa—which I have characterized as the portable closet—is ironic in its questioning of the segregation system combined as that questioning is with a celebration of the anonymity afforded to the burqa's wearers. This chapter will explore this paradox foregrounded by the novel's characterization of the domestic space, highlighting the often complex, seemingly contradictory responses of women who operate within the veiling and segregation system in rural Pakistan, where the veil often functions as a revealing-concealing agent—concealing the woman who wears the veil, while simultaneously signaling female presence, feminine sexuality that must be controlled and hidden but also always acknowledged in public space. The zenana appears to be a constricting, imprisoning space within the novel, concealing sexuality and domestic abuse, which reads as an indictment of the veiling and segregation system. The veil itself, however, is not challenged, and is, instead celebrated for the anonymity it provides its wearers. Heer, in fact, is forced to accept, and even celebrate, the seclusion and “protection” of the burqa, and learns to use the seclusion of the zenana for her own gain, even though she consistently questions the need for the seclusion.

Although it is a fictionalized account, the author's epigraph proclaims that the "novel is inspired by a true story", which, in turn, underscores assumptions about the oppression of Muslim women in the "Eastern"/ Islamic world, exemplified by the (mis)readings of the symbolic significance of the Muslim veil.<sup>67</sup> I establish a dialogue between Irigaray's contemplations, and Durrani's characterization of the zenana, remaining aware of the potential pitfalls of such an enterprise. I keep the different contexts of the texts in the foreground as I attempt to depart from the current discourse surrounding the enforced segregation and seclusion<sup>68</sup> of women both in Pakistan, as well as in the Arab-Muslim world where the mere sight of a scarf on a woman's head gives rise to intense debate. Feminists like Ghais Jasser view the veiling system as a manifestation of the misogyny inherent within Islam itself, and reject the veil completely, in all its forms. The assumption underlying such a rejection is that the religion views women as intrinsically inferior to men, an inferiority that necessitates restrictions on their movement and on their expressions of "self" in the form of dress and behavior. Such a claim constructs Muslim women as victims of patriarchy, silencing and ignoring their often complex relationship with the veil and the segregation system. Purdah, or the Muslim veiling and segregation system as it is practiced in Pakistan, and as it has been depicted in the novel, cannot be celebrated or rejected unequivocally. My analysis of the

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<sup>67</sup> An example of this symbolic "misreading" is the legislation of Bill 094 in Quebec—which prohibits government employees from providing service to anyone who covers their face (wears a niqab)—and by the banning of face-coverings during Canada's citizenship oath-taking ceremonies. See editorials of Toronto Star for more details.

<sup>68</sup> I refer, here, to the popular discourse in North American and European media that associates the wearing of the veil, and more specifically, that of the burqa, with the religiously sanctioned oppression of women in Islam. The section on the veil will expand on this assertion further.

novel's depiction of the system, and Heer's complex relationship with the myriad forms of the veil demonstrates the intrinsic connection between women's identity and their veils. The different types of veils adopted by women in *Blasphemy*—be it the burqa, the chador, the dupatta or complete seclusion in purdah—are all part of an intricate system signaling a woman's (and by extension her family's) engagement with, and acceptance of, the Islamic injunction for gender segregation, and the cost they are willing to pay for religious conformity.

### 3.2 Ambiguity of the Zenana and the Burqa: Theoretical Approach to *Blasphemy*

I begin with a brief account of the novel itself, and then move on to a brief description of the specific historical development of the purdah or segregation system in Pakistan, as well as the cultural significance of the sufi system, in order to launch into my re-figuration of the zenana and the burqa as an ambiguous space that is particularly feminine, one that may enable more freedoms than the novel leads us to believe. The focus will remain on the novel and its representation of the zenana, the depiction of which will be explicated through my reading of Luce Irigaray alongside Anne-Emmanuelle Berger's discussion of the Muslim veil in the libidinal economy. Berger establishes a dialogue between Irigaray's psychoanalytic reading of sexual difference, and the complex role played by the Muslim veil in a specifically Muslim libidinal economy. I take a dual approach to the novel: I begin my analysis using a historical

materialist approach, modeled on the one described by Tahira Khan in *Beyond Honor*,<sup>69</sup> in order to ground the novel and its myriad characters in the specific social milieu of rural Pakistan. In the second half of the chapter, I will move on to a more theoretical analysis of the psycho-social impact of the segregation system in Pakistan, as dramatized within the novel itself. By taking this dual approach, I hope to show that the veil is more than a physical object, and that it is a system of attitudes, behaviors and injunctions internalized and even celebrated in Pakistan. I will also show that the veiling and segregation practice in rural Pakistan, as dramatized within the novel, is intrinsic to the fabric of social relations in the nation as a whole, and that the practice itself is never seriously challenged nor questioned, even though the veil consistently imposes restrictions on women's mobility and participation in the libidinal and social economy. I establish a dialogue between Irigaray's conceptualizations of enclosed (intensely feminine) spaces and Durrani's construction of a particular kind of zenana, to show that the veil (burqa and chador in *Blasphemy*) and the purdah system are inherently linked to women's sense of identity and of identification with specific economic and class structures, acquiescence with which is key to women's survival in Pakistan's rural patriarchy. As I launch my analysis of Durrani's construction of the zenana, I will show that the femininity of an enclosed space is not necessarily something to celebrate, as Irigaray seems to suggest, but it is also not a space that can be rejected completely.

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<sup>69</sup> Tahira Khan identifies two feminist political and analytical stances: the first is an idealist one, according to her, one that demands equality for women within state institutions, without questioning the nature of those institutions themselves. For Khan, liberal feminism supports these claims, whereas Marxist or materialist feminists seek to change patriarchal institutions like the heterosocial family and capitalism (xi).

### 3.3 *Blasphemy*: An Analytical Summary

Tehmina Durrani gained fame as a writer after the publication of her autobiography, *My Feudal Lord* (first published in 1991; North American edition published in 1994). Married to Ghulam Mustafa Khar, a prominent politician in Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's government and later the Chief Minister of Punjab, Durrani revealed Khar as an unrelenting wife abuser and oppressor of women in her autobiography (Omar n. pag.) which she published after her divorce from Khar. The book has been translated into thirty-six languages and was the winner of the Italian Marissa Bellasario prize (Sandhya 28). Durrani's frank and open examination of her life with an abusive man who had (before the publication of her autobiography) been hailed as a "charismatic champion of democracy" (Omar) has been extolled as a daring and controversial act. Published originally in English, the autobiography was first read by "an upper-class, Westernized audience, prepared to accept [her] ideas more readily than the more traditional-minded middle-class readers" (Barat 216) of regional languages like Urdu. Her novel *Blasphemy* is also "based on a true story, [and] is a blistering attack on an institution with divine sanction: the hereditary pirs, the keepers of the shrines of sufi saints" (Goldenberg n. pag.). The novel blends fact with fiction, and reveals a world of intense isolation, domestic abuse and sexual violence, dominated by a sadistic patriarch—the Pir. The novel generated some controversy, and it was feared that it might be banned in Pakistan for its indictment of the sufi pirs of Pakistan (Siddiqi n. pag.). However, as Kamal Siddiqi points out, the novel "will make little difference in either their [the pirs] lives or the status that they enjoy. One reason is that the book is in English—a language read by under [sic] one per cent of Pakistanis. And the very fact that it is a book gives cause for comfort:

thanks to the efforts of zamindars [landowners] and other interests, over 72 per cent of Pakistanis are illiterate today”. The novel has been compared to Bengladeshi author Taslima Nasrin’s indictments of the Muslim clergy,<sup>70</sup> and is available in Urdu under the title *Laanat* [insult] (Hussain M. n. pag.).

*Blasphemy* is framed by accounts of death and destruction—or attempts at destruction—of Pir Sain’s powerful hold over a village. It begins with the death of the Pir, and ends with the staged death of the main character, Heer, the Pir’s wife. It is only after the Pir’s death that Heer can tell her story, even to her own self. The daughter of a widow, she marries the Pir against her own wishes in order to ensure wealth and happiness for the rest of her family. She is taken by complete surprise when she learns that she will live the rest of her life in complete and utter isolation from the rest of the world, her own world confined to her bedroom and a square courtyard that she consistently encircles, telling herself that “[her] world is round like God made it. [She]’ll make it round like everyone else’s” (Durrani 45). Heer wants freedom from the zenana, and does everything in her power to attain it, but for her, freedom itself has a shape—it is round, encircling, enclosing albeit in a non-restrictive manner. The spatial framework implied by Heer’s attempts to encircle the square courtyard on a daily basis signals her tacit acceptance of the idea that freedom itself cannot be divorced completely from enclosures and women’s domesticity. She may want to escape the square courtyard, but does not necessarily reject the idea of protective enclosures—she does not reject the

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<sup>70</sup> Taslima Nasrin published a novel *Shame* that exposed Muslim patriarchal violence and domestic abuse, which prompted death threats by Muslim extremists, leading her to exile first in Sweden then in France. See Barat’s article for details.



protection (and anonymity) afforded to her by her burqa in its entirety—and continues to wear the burqa even after she manages to escape the prison-like zenana at the end of the novel. She may want to make her own world round like “everyone else’s” but cannot help making other women’s world square once she discovers that her own access to power within the zenana is mediated through her (ab)use of other, weaker, women.

She describes her beatings at her husband’s hands in vivid detail, as well as her daily rapes. Very quickly, she learns to live according to his schedule, and learns to become the quiet, docile, submissive wife he expects. However, she finds it impossible to accept her isolation from the rest of the world, and envies the women who can come and go as they please, wearing a portable closet—the *burqa*. She envies the women frequenting the courtyard, jealous of the fact that they could laugh and chat with each other while she herself is forced to hold herself aloof from everyone due to her “exalted” and “royal” status as the Pir’s wife. The reason for her seclusion from the world, her confinement, is not only determined by her gender, but also by the fact that she is the wife of a powerful descendant of a sufi saint. Since Pir Sain claims for himself the status of the Prophet Muhammad, his wife, and all women belonging to his household, are relegated to the “exalted” status of the “mothers of the nation” who have been commanded by the Quran to shield themselves from the world. She learns through the course of her life, however, that the women whom she envied for their freedom, “in reality...had no freedom. Although they could go home, their poverty imprisoned them to the Shrine so securely that even if any dared to flee, their kith and kin were trapped in the master’s gripping net” (105-106).

Heer gives birth to two daughters and two sons who are raised by the women who frequent the courtyard, as she herself is too busy ensuring that the household is run as smoothly as possible, and meeting her husband's sexual demands, especially after being told by Amma Sain,<sup>71</sup> her mother-in-law, that her true power lies in ensuring that her husband desires only her body and no one else's. The Pir's sexual appetite is hidden from Heer initially, but as her daughters begin to show signs of puberty, he begins to "notice" their "budding" youth. In order to keep her husband away from her daughters,<sup>72</sup> Heer becomes his pimp, providing him with the young girls he desires, choosing them out of the crowd of women and girls that frequent the courtyard, which is part of the zenana. The story becomes more complex when the Pir begins to introduce other men into his own bedroom, forcing his wife to have sex with them while he himself videotapes from a distance. When Heer protests the filming of the multiple rapes, asking him what would happen if she was recognized as Pir Sain's wife, he asks her "Where will he [the prospective rapist] ever see you?" (160) a question that highlights the Pir's complacency and confidence in the "sanctity" of purdah. Since a considerable amount of resources have been spent on ensuring that no strange man ever sets eyes on the wife of the Pir, he finds it extremely easy to exploit the same seclusion for his own gain. As Heer puts it, "These custodians of the people, revered for adherence to the faith, were concealing their

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<sup>71</sup> Amma Sain literally means "Mother" with "Sain" added for respect. The characters in the novel are all addressed with nicknames, ostensibly to hide their real identities. Most of the nicknames, however, reveal enough about the person's character to make them identifiable, or at points, to caricaturize them. The nicknames also gesture at Heer's consistent attempt to "box in" women she comes into contact with.

<sup>72</sup> Given his lack of involvement in the zenana, the threat of incest is not as real to him as it is to Heer. The novel suggests that he may not even be fully aware of the fact that the young girls he finds so enticing are his own daughters.

sins under my *burqa*. It allowed them to introduce me as a whore from the city because no one had ever laid eyes on the venerable wife of the *pir*” (164). While being raped by a powerful jagirdar [landowner] to whom she had been introduced as Piyari, Heer reflects: “While the *jagirdar*’s fat fingers ran like black rats over my naked body, my mind was consumed with the idea of *purdah*. From behind it no call for help could be heard. An abandoned species was trapped in a forbidden world. Everything corrupt happened under the shroud, when it was off a faceless and nameless woman appeared” (164). It is important to note here, that Heer does not necessarily rebel against the burqa or purdah itself. She dwells on the way the purdah system is exploited to satisfy the appetites of corrupt, sadistic men, and finds the intricate system of purdah and the multiple veils to be suffocating and harmful, but as will become clear, she attempts to use the same system of veiling for her own gain after the Pir’s death.

Heer justifies both instances of sexual perversion—sex with multiple girls, and rape by multiple partners—as actions taken in her own defense to ensure survival for herself and her children. She introduces the first young girl to her husband herself, in order to distract him from her daughter, Guppi. She agrees to have sex with different men in order to distract Pir Sain from the rebellion of her elder son, Chote Sain. Through all of this, Heer continuously contemplates the meaning of religion, wondering why Allah has abandoned her and her offspring. Her narrative is littered with comments like: “Allah seemingly had no control over Pir Sain. This despite the fact that he was believed to be His envoy. I wondered why God allowed him to misuse His name. Even ordinary mortals would not allow the misuse of theirs. I could not fathom why, Allah preserved and protected tyrants” (162). Her questioning of religion, through her questioning of Allah’s

reasons, however, maintains a focus on the Pir's use of religion to cloak sexual perversion. The abuse carried on in the name of quasi-religious power by Pir Sain does not shake her faith in Islam—she falls on her prayer mat after being forced to watch porn (146) and shudders at “Allah exploited” (128), but does not go so far as to reject or even question Islam. This implies a distinction<sup>73</sup> between Heer's understanding of her faith as a benevolent world-view, and the use of Islam by patriarchal forces to justify violence and abuse. Heer's urban education helps her distinguish between the faith Islam as it should be practiced and Islam as a tool used by its masters (the sufi pirs and religious leaders) to maintain their political hegemony.

The only time Heer leaves the physical confines of her home is after the Pir re-names her Piyari [Beloved, or pretty woman] and introduces her as a prostitute from the city to the men he brings into his “sanctified” bedroom. It somehow becomes easier for the Pir to allow Heer to leave the confines of the household once the new identity is assigned and tested on the men. The Pir takes her to the guest house, which is linked to her bedroom via a narrow tunnel, where she is to meet, and greet, his guests. She tells the readers that she “was so excited at stepping out that the reason did not matter. Sadly, stepping out meant nothing. Cheel's<sup>74</sup> presence, my husband's company, the darkness of a tunnel, and the two small net holes in my *burqa* let nothing through. I counted five hundred and sixty-two steps to our destination” (Durrani 164). Even as she thinks she is

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<sup>73</sup> This distinction between the benevolence of the faith and the misuse of its injunctions by religious clergy can be read as a political, face-saving tactic employed by Durrani to give her novel traction among different audiences.

<sup>74</sup> Cheel, literally translated as eagle, is the hawk-like woman assigned to watch over the zenana. Heer assumes that Cheel acts as the Pir Sain's eyes and ears within the zenana when he is not present.

leaving the confines of the zenana, she finds that she has not left it at all, that the enforcement of *purdah* has been so effective that her identity as the Pir's wife—which would have given her a semblance of power—is subsumed by the newly assigned identity of a prostitute from the city. At the guesthouse, Heer meets the man she had imagined herself in love with before she was forced to marry the Pir. For her, however, “the love story had twisted beyond belief...He had met a prostitute. He had recognized [her]. [She] was the woman he might have married...Just one glance so many years ago and the security of *purdah* had gone. The seal had broken” (Durrani 167). Even though Ranjha<sup>75</sup> recognizes Heer as the girl he had fallen in love with, he only sees her as a prostitute, never realizing that she is being used and abused by her own husband. Unable to find any other way out of her prison—both physically as well as emotionally—but finally finding a reason to try to escape, Heer visits the holy shrine. Here she finds unexpected help in the form of a robed figure (who is later revealed to be Cheel, the woman whose hawk-like eyes and silence Heer feared the most) who helps her get rid of her husband by killing him at her express request. This is one of the few moments in which the community formed by the enclosures the village's women are forced to inhabit works in Heer's favour. Heer is schooled into believing that, being Pir Sain's wife, she is to hold herself aloof from the lower-class women frequenting the courtyard, and she also learns to police her own behavior while in the courtyard, believing that her actions are reported

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<sup>75</sup> Heer-Ranjha is a popular love story in South Asia. Heer and Ranjha fall in love, but live in different villages, separated by a river. In order to meet, Heer traverses the river every night on an earthen pot. She sinks to her death when her pot is switched by her brothers without her knowledge.

back to the Pir by Cheel. It is only after the Pir's death that she learns Cheel's true purpose for remaining in the zenana—Cheel had been patiently waiting for the right moment to somehow harm Pir Sain, even kill him, for exploiting the shrine's holiness for his own social and political ends.

Feeling released from prison, and fueled by a desire to avenge herself and unmask the secrets of the shrine, she ventures out of her confinement every night, with the help of an ex-servant girl, Tara, bent on destroying the reputation of the dead Pir, hoping to reveal the secret life of the “holy man”. She visits the men she had been introduced to as Piyari, revealing her identity as the Pir's wife, hoping to, once and for all, expose “the shrine [as a] symbol of all exploitation” (Durrani 196). The plan backfires, and her attempt at disrobing the religious family's secrets succeeds only in exposing her to the world's accusing gaze, while the reputation of the shrine, the holy family, remains intact. Her only form of escape, then, becomes the staging of her own death with the help of her brother and her family. The novel ends with her visit to the shrine that has been erected in her name while veiled by a white burqa.

Heer's complex relationship with purdah—which she characterizes as her prison throughout the novel—is tempered by her celebration of the anonymity that the burqa provides for her after the Pir's death. Even though she tries desperately to disrobe the secrets of the keeper of the shrine, the system of multiple veils hides her identity as the Pir's virtuous wife so effectively that she cannot make the power—inherent in her “exalted” status as the Pir's wife—work in her favour after his death. Where the zenana functions as an imprisoning, restrictive and prison-like space in the novel, the burqa lends itself to multiple uses. It hides Heer (the bride) effectively from view, so effectively, in

fact, that Heer (the wife) is unrecognizable to all men. Women frequenting the courtyard could have vouched for Heer's identity, but they themselves are completely powerless. The anonymity possible due to the burqa is exploited by Heer at two significant moments in the novel—at the beginning, when Ranjha manages to catch a glimpse of her beauty, prompting him to propose marriage, and at the end of the novel, when she visits the (fake) shrine erected in her honour, covered, embraced, by a white burqa. The novel's approach to the veil, then, is complex and almost paradoxical. It constructs the purdah system as an intricate system of veils and spatial organization that restricts and confines women's mobility while simultaneously hiding domestic abuse and violence. The burqa, however, is questioned, but celebrated simultaneously, as a portable closet that allows Heer to enter and interact with spaces where she could (attempt to) change the course of her life. Heer uses the burqa at different points in the novel to hide her body, and hence her identity, from casual observers, letting it “fall” and reveal her identity at key moments. However, the power of the burqa's folds is such that it obliterates Heer's identity completely at key moments in the novel, so much so that she has a significant amount of trouble trying to establish her own credibility, as I will discuss shortly.

The novel is written from the intensely claustrophobic perspective of Heer, interspersed with accounts of domestic abuse by women interacting with the zenana on a periodic basis. Since Heer herself is confined to one household, the “outside world” intrudes only rarely within the novel, which leaves geo-political timelines blurred and almost impossible to determine. The characters within the novel are only addressed with nicknames, giving a hint to the general region in which those nicknames are most common. Heer and most other characters address the religious leader as Pir Sain, for

example, and Sain is the Sindhi equivalent of “Sir”. This helps me narrow the location down to Southern Pakistan. The only clue to time period within the novel is a major conference or gathering of religious leaders in Pakistan’s capital, Islamabad, a gathering from which the Pir returns laden with “Western” dresses and accoutrements (Durrani 164). The timing and location of the conference leads me to suggest that the novel is pointing towards General Zia’s Islamization campaign (1977-1988), during which he held multiple conferences with religious leaders to ensure the correct implementation of religious laws. That is as far as a geo-political timeline can go.

As I move on to analyze the novel’s characterization of the zenana, it is important to note that in spite of its claims to “authenticity” through the authorial epigraph—the book jacket asserts that the events in the novel are based on actual events and that identities of characters have been concealed deliberately—the title is: *Blasphemy: A Novel*. Its focus is on a specific Pir’s household; with powerful political affiliations (only glossed in the novel), the Pir is beyond any social reproach in rural Sind. We hear only Heer’s point of view, and she takes great pains to maintain her image as the victim. Even when she becomes a pimp for her husband, she places the blame elsewhere: on her circumstances, on her weakness, on her need to survive in her husband’s hell. The Pir is portrayed as an all-powerful man whose authority over his own world remains unchallenged. He orchestrates people’s lives from a distance. His involvement in Pakistani politics, for example, is portrayed to be that of a master puppeteer. All religious leaders in Pakistan, according to Heer, support their favorite candidate, and orchestrate issues of state without getting involved in politics directly. According to Heer,



To gain victories in elections and become ministers or prime ministers many aspiring politicians also sought his [the Pir's] help. His influence was not restricted to his own area; it was loosely scattered across the country. Pockets of Pir Sain's *mureeds* [followers] lived in the most forsaken places and considered a pilgrimage to him as divine summons. His followers voted where he instructed them to, and that gave him permanent power in the capital. (63)

Heer's world remains unchanged and unaffected by the political upheavals and the shifting allegiances—from Zia-ul-Haq to Benazir and Nawaz Sharif—that characterized the 1980's and 1990's in Pakistan. My analysis of the novel keeps this context in the foreground as I attempt to theorize the intensely feminine space of the zenana, and its control by the men who own it: feudal lords and sufi pirs whose fortunes remain unaffected by the shifting political system.

The main focus of the novel is the prevalent system of veiling and segregation, a system that is sanctioned by Islam and practiced in varying forms in almost every Islamicate<sup>76</sup> country and society. Its implementation in Pakistan, specifically, is unique to the region and to the historical evolution of Islam in the subcontinent. The novel uses the zenana and the burqa both symbolically and literally—as a cultural idea encapsulated in the phrase “chador aur chardewari” as well as a materially dangerous system of

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<sup>76</sup> I borrow this term from Asma Afsaruddin's *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/ate societies*. Afsaruddin draws a distinction between Muslim or Islamic societies—those that draw upon a commonly shared Muslim tradition prior to Western colonization, and Islamicate societies—which adopt symbols and traditions of the Islamic belief system, but borrow freely from both Western and Muslim belief systems (3). For her, Islamic refers to societies that were not colonized or influenced by European colonization or “Western Capitalism” while Islamicate refers to the pre-modern and modern periods—nineteenth century and onwards where Muslim societies attempt to continuously strike a balance between modern capitalist or colonial social and belief systems and the Muslim tradition. (3)

exploitation and abuse—for the women who inhabit and interact with Heer’s spaces. Due to the particular manifestation of the purdah system in the Pir’s household, which is specifically restrictive for the women belonging to his family, the only contact with men that the women of the zenana have in the novel is either through the very young or through the Pir, who has open access to the women’s courtyard and Heer’s bedroom through a separate entrance. Other women frequenting the courtyard can come and go as they please, as long as they are covered by the burqa, a portable closet. The novel also foregrounds a specific Islamic sect: Sufism, the evolution of which is also distinct to the region. Before I launch my reading of the system of segregation and its impact on the woman’s body, it is important to highlight the material and historical specificity of purdah and Sufism’s impact on that system in Pakistan.

### 3.4 The Evolution of Sufism in Pakistan

The role of the religious leaders of Sind has been a complex and changing one, as Heer takes pains to point out within the novel. In her introduction to *Sufi Saints and State Power*, Sara Ansari points out the differences between Muslim religious leaders as perceived in the “West” and those operating in Pakistan. According to Ansari, there are two major types of Muslim religious leaders: the *ulama* (scholar) and the sufi saint. Following the Partition, the *ulama* were appointed guardians of the *sharia* [holy (Islamic) law], and assigned to interpret and administer God’s law, due to which they became embroiled in earthly duties, relying heavily on stipends from the government and state leaders to make their livelihood. Sufi saints before partition

sought to gain knowledge of God in their hearts... Because they placed greater emphasis on spiritual growth rather than on the letter of God’s law, they were

often able to reach out to people of other faiths, indeed to draw them towards Islam. For these reasons, and because they depended on the offerings of the pious rather than the gifts of kings, they often tended to stand aloof from state power and its representatives. (Ansari *Sufi Saints* 4)

However, with the formation of the Pakistani state on religious grounds, religious leaders sought to gain control of the newly formed state. According to Shahnaz Rouse, as long as Pakistan remained democratic, the religious right did not make any real political gains, losing seat upon seat in elections. With the ascension of Zia-ul-Haq to power, however, an alliance was finally formed between Zia's regime and the religious right: Zia needed justification for his continued hold over the state of Pakistan, while the religious right needed power (Rouse "Gender(ed) Struggles" 19). Rouse does not make a clear distinction between the *ulama* and the sufi saints, however, and addresses the "religious right" as a unified political category. Ansari, on the other hand, shows that "Despite... policies aimed at undermining their power, *pir* families have remained central to the religious and political life of Sind" (*Sufi Saints* 152) since the advent of the British. According to Ansari, after the formation of Pakistan,

[l]and-reform measures which were intended to redistribute power in the countryside had a restricted impact for *pirs*, like other non-religious landowners, often found ways of evading ceilings on land ownership. Their spiritual position also meant that they could receive additional support from *murids* [followers] to compensate for any losses which they incurred. (*Sufi Saints* 152)

Ansari also shows that the Pakistani state had more to gain by maintaining good relations with the *pirs* of Sind: "The access to rural Sind which *pirs* continued to provide explained

why governments sooner rather than later came to terms with their existence” (152). Thus Sufism, with all its “unislamic” practices,<sup>77</sup> has continued to flourish in rural Pakistan, and has, in fact, been used for political gains at varying points in history.<sup>78</sup>

While describing the basic tenets of sufism, Robert Rozeznal shows that “As an inner or ‘mystical’ dimension of Islam, Sufism (*tasawwuf*) stands as an alternative nexus of Islamic authority, piety and practice. Neither a sect nor a cult, it is best understood as a spiritual quest, experienced and expressed via an interpersonal teaching network centered on the fundamental master-disciple relationship” (1) a relationship in which the disciple (mureed) seeks the favour of the sufi pir (murshid) who acts as the intermediary between God and human beings. This foundational concept is considered to be sacrilegious by “conservative Islamist critics who reject any intermediaries between human beings and God” (Rozeznal 1) and who then label Sufis as idolatrous and blasphemous.

Sufism, or the path to enlightenment, as it evolved in India and Pakistan, is strictly regulated. The mureed, or disciple, is required to follow the pir blindly, and in “actual practice, [the pir] is obeyed as much [sic] the prophet Muhammad” (Subhan 88). According to Rozeznal, “[t]hough they [sufi pirs] vary in their teachings and techniques, most Sufis strictly follow the dictates of the Qur’an and the *shari’a* (Divine law), and

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<sup>77</sup> Sufi saints’ path to enlightenment includes expressions of love for the “Beloved” (God) through art, music and dance, practices that have been condemned as unislamic by the conservative religious leaders (Subhan 31).

<sup>78</sup> For a detailed study of Sufism in South Asia, see: Subhan, John A. *Sufism, Its Saints and Shrines: An Introduction to the Study of Sufism with Special Reference to India and Pakistan*. 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1999.

model their behavior on the example of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunna*)” (1). *Blasphemy* foregrounds this exalted status and power in its characterization of Pir Sain, and juxtaposes it with Heer’s consistent critique of the Pir’s abuse of power and people’s acceptance of his right to tyranny, given the deep roots of religious beliefs and of shrine-worship. According to Subhan, “[w]hile the Sufis, in virtue of being God’s chosen people, are looked upon as elect of the Muslims, the saints, in virtue of being God’s ‘friends’, are regarded as the elect of the Sufis” (103). Heer spends considerable time describing the centrality and the power of the Pir’s shrine in village life, as well as national life, in the novel. She describes the throngs of women and children who visit the shrine and the Pir’s household regularly, hoping, praying, for problems to be solved. Subhan asserts that “[t]he visitation of shrines is a very common practice in Islam, and has its origin in the Sufi belief that ‘the saints of God die not, but merely depart from one habitation to another.’ In consequence the excessive honour paid to saints and *pirs* in their life-time is continued to them after their death” (107). As Heer shows, the Pir she is married to is believed to be the direct descendant of both the Prophet Muhammad and Babaji, the original ascetic saint to whom the shrine is dedicated. The Pir, thus, enjoys his exalted status not for any religious piety of his own, but due to his status as the keeper of the shrine, and as a direct descendant of the original *pir*. The sufi pirs, in spite of their classification as blasphemous, almost idolatrous by Muslim clergy, have been acknowledged as particularly useful to the maintenance of political power over most of the Pakistani rural population (as my discussion of Ansari’s work has shown), and the system has been protected from government intervention due to its hold over popular imaginations. The purdah system functions in a manner similar to the sufi system, in that

it enables an amalgamation of patriarchal power, making women into pawns bartered by families for political power—Heer is “sold” to the Pir, in exchange for money (in the form of a large dowry) and prestige (in the form of a familial connection with a powerful family) by her mother.

### 3.5 The Characterization of Purdah in *Blasphemy*

The juxtaposition of the rural interpretation of Purdah with the liberated urban setting of Heer’s childhood underscores the social, economic and historical factors that regulate the implementation of seclusion. As I indicated in my first chapter, the system is complex, a complexity that is foregrounded by the multiple words used for it. Purdah in Pakistan is seen both as an excuse for debarring women from socio-economic and political life, and also as a safe haven, an area in which women can relax, even earn and spend income through informal means. If physical segregation is not possible in a household as in wealthy households, a curtain is used to demarcate space in a home, and where even that is not possible, a scarf drawn over a woman’s head is usually enough to signal gender segregation, prompting specific behavior—lowered eyes, silence—on the part of the women of the household. Heer’s different experiences of purdah, from her urban childhood to her rural married life, help highlight this multiplicity. Heer wears a burqa while at school, and through its “transparent veil” (Durrani 21) locks eyes “into the magnetic gaze of a man sitting behind a steering wheel” (Durrani 21). This moment in the novel is significant for Heer. Her friend’s brother, Ranjha (the man in the car), sees her picture, and sends a letter to her, asking to marry her, and in the process, becomes the only man, apart from her brother and husband, who can vouch for her identity as Heer. Before she has a chance to tell her mother, or to reply to Ranjha’s proposal, Heer is

bullied into accepting Pir Sain's marriage proposal by her mother. The fact that Heer cannot protest or rebel against her mother's plans also highlights the power of the purdah system. Not only does the system segregate men's space from women's, it also functions through specific behaviours on the part of a household's women in front of the household's leaders, regardless of their gender. Purdah, or curtain, is linguistically and metaphorically designed to cloak femininity, as well as to restrict the powers—sexual and political—and freedom of women, both physically as well as emotionally.

How the veil is adopted in Pakistan depends very heavily on class, social status and cultural expectations, as depicted in *Blasphemy's* shifting focus from the urban to the rural, and from purdah in a lower-class family to the imprisoning zenana of Heer's married life. With its focus on the zenana, the novel maintains crucial distinctions between who gets locked away and for how long, distinctions that highlight the class divisions of the rural society. The courtyard, for example, is filled with women who can traverse the boundaries between the outside and the inside, some by using the nominal protection afforded by a chador while others using the full protection of the burqa. The only women completely confined to a specific structure are those directly linked to the Pir—his mother, wife and daughters. Such a distinction foregrounds economic and class differences within a particular social system. According to Sitara Khan, only those women whose families can afford the loss of the woman's income are entirely sequestered: only upper-class women observe purdah. Thus, women belonging to lower social classes literally take the zenana with them in the form of the burqa or chador, in order to maintain and signal chastity and virtue while in the public (male) domain. The burqa, then, affords lower-class women (limited) freedoms—the ability to visit each

other, for example, and to find community and support within a social set-up that is designed to ensure their complete subjugation to patriarchy. Heer, in fact, begins her life in the zenana dwelling on the maids' mobility, jealous of the fact that they were "luckier than [her] for they could go home" (49). It was her royalty—earned through marriage—that confined her both in a physical place as well as in behaviours. As she tells us: "Amma Sain had made it clear to me that the mistress of the house kept her distance from the other women, for the master strongly disapproved of any kind of familiarity between them. The maids, however, could talk and bicker among themselves. It was their lowly position that allowed them to do so" (49). She learns over time, however, that even the maids were not completely free, for their poverty, their gender, bound them inextricably to the shrine.

The purdah system in Pakistan is designed to provide a space of safety and sexual protection for women, in theory. This intention of purdah is highlighted by Heer's use of her burqa to "conceal a flush and hide the answer" (Durrani 21) from her friend who brought Ranjha's marriage proposal, both to express modesty and to protect her reputation as a "good" girl. From the moment Heer is thrust into purdah, however, Durrani's novel challenges this basic assumption. According to Hanna Papanek, the purdah system hinges on the segregative principles of the Hindu caste system, and the injunctions of Islam, both of which demand the division of society along gender, class and even ethnic lines. The basic principles that help justify and conceptualize the purdah system in Pakistan rely heavily on the precepts of the division of labor along gender lines, and the assumption that restricting women's mobility will provide them protection from the (dangerous) "outside" world (Papanek 192-193). According to Papanek,



In purdah societies, women are simultaneously defined as being very important in the family unit and very vulnerable when they move into the world outside the home. Purdah provides symbolic shelter for the women in the family, not least from strong impulses like sex and aggression which are clearly recognized as being part of the human condition but difficult for the individual to control. (193)

The novel complicates this attempt at sexual and impulse control through purdah. Durrani suggests that far from helping to control sex and aggression, the implementation of strict purdah in the Pir's household is the very system that enables sexual and moral transgressions. The novel shows that the system of purdah, and the way it is implemented in rural Pakistan, entraps women, leaving them at the mercy of their male "protectors". Thus, the veiling system as described in the novel veils sexual transgression and moral corruption, while simultaneously veiling, and restricting, women's bodies in multiple ways, ways that prevent them from protecting each other or themselves from male aggression

Papanek<sup>79</sup> shows that it is the veiling system itself that prevents Muslim women from achieving equality in Pakistan. However, the nature of the system, with its insistence on separation of male and female roles both inside and outside the domestic sphere, inverts western perceptions of "traditional" male and female roles in interesting ways. Papanek notes that

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<sup>79</sup> Papanek's exclusive focus on the purdah system in Pakistan, unlike most of the Pakistani feminists I have identified in my first chapter, is reminiscent of Fanon's assertion that those visiting a Muslim country are struck by the Muslim veiling practice first and foremost. The fact that Pakistani feminists do not address the veiling system, but that Papanek focuses almost exclusively on it, could easily be construed as an Orientalising impulse on the part of Papanek.

the common paradigm of western countries of the female secretary or assistant whose work is 'complementary' to that of the male superior does not apply in Pakistan, because of the operation of the purdah system—even though it most closely resembles the Muslim ideal of male and female complementarity. Rather, the 'seclusion' of working women in Pakistan into occupations which are particularly theirs tends to limit the contacts between unrelated men and women during working hours and also decreases the possibilities of competition for scarce jobs. (204-205)

In fact, the most sought after women-only professions become those of the "lady doctor" and the teacher, in order to reduce the possibility of male-female contact in service industries. Since purdah restricts women's mobility, it also increases a man's involvement in the household, as it makes women dependant on the man to bring home groceries and other provisions. Papanek shows that since certain women cannot move beyond the four walls, men are expected to complete household shopping, and are expected to spend time running errands, accompanying women on trips, and visits to other households (198). According to Papanek, then, "Purdah is... a visible sign on the part of one family not only about its attitudes of conformity, but also of its ideological bent within Islam, and of the price which it is willing and able to pay for such signaling" (211).

The idea that the zenana is designed to protect and shield women from predatory (male) aggression is further elaborated on by Gail Minault in her essay "Other Voices, Other Rooms: The View from the *Zenana*," in which she focuses on the practice of

spatial segregation and seclusion of Muslim women in North India.<sup>80</sup> Seclusion may not necessarily mean isolation—in spite of Heer’s feelings of claustrophobia and her very real suffering within the confines of her zenana, her zenana (specifically the courtyard) is the opposite of quiet and/or isolating for many of the women frequenting it. As Minault shows, in reference to nineteenth century texts, the zenanas were not prisons but vibrant social spaces (111). Not all Muslim women were confined to the zenana, nor did spatial segregation mean stagnation and fecundity in women’s lives (111). The main thrust of her argument is that women confined to zenanas led independent lives, with men’s involvement in the running of the household reduced to the bare minimum (116-117). Men’s roles were confined to that of breadwinner, while women made all the important decisions within the household (Minault 116). The paradox of Heer’s position is that she maintains the appearance of control over the zenana—she is, after all, the Pir Sain’s wife, and thus deserving of a certain level of respect and adulation—but she has no real control over her life or her sexuality. Even after the Pir Sain’s murder, her attempt to redeem herself is thwarted, and her ultimate escape is her own staged death. The shifting contexts of Minault’s discussion of aristocratic Muslim women in nineteenth century India, and of Heer’s experiences of segregation yield different interpretations, but the fractured zenana

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<sup>80</sup> Although her historical focus is completely different (she discusses nineteenth century texts), the assumption is that certain customs and traditions have been preserved, perhaps even entrenched, in spite of the colonization of India by the British. The novel itself suggests an intrinsic link between historical examples of seclusion and the current practice. There are numerous references to preservation of tradition and claims that, since the Pir is as “holy” as the Prophet Mohammad himself, his household should be modeled after the examples set by Him. Thus, in as much as Minault’s historical context might be different, her conclusions about women’s role within the zenana remain relevant to my analysis of *Blasphemy*.

depicted in *Blasphemy* also offers some protection to the women frequenting the space, proving to be conducive to the formation of vibrant social lives.

In the novel, the zenana is divided into three zones, all of which impact Heer's position within the household differently. The courtyard is a vibrant space, where most of the household's women (as well as those travelling from different villages wishing to have an audience with the Pir) congregate. The kitchen, the second zone of the zenana, is consistently preoccupied with the preparation of elaborate meals for the consumption of the household's men. It is the dark, cavernous bedroom, the third zone of the zenana, where the windows are never opened, and where "it was always night" (Durrani 44), that cloaks sexual and physical abuse. The zenana in *Blasphemy* is a vibrant social space, where Heer can interact with women from the village, hear their secrets, empathize with them and take pleasure in their company, but it is also the space that enables violence and abuse. Since she herself is too busy managing the kitchen and tending to her husband's sexual demands, Heer's children are raised by a community of women frequenting the zenana, supervised by Amma Sain, Heer's mother-in-law, which in turn, highlights the communal aspects of the zenana. The bedroom, however, is described by Heer as hell, as her trap, the one space where she can find no relief from her husband's sexual appetite and his sadism. Behind its closed doors, alone with her husband, she is reduced to a tangle of fear and pain, unable to talk to him, to defend herself from his anger or to satisfy him. Exhorted by Amma Sain to use sex to control Pir Sain, she finds it "impossible to exploit a bed in which [she] was reduced to nothing" (Durrani 55). *Blasphemy's* characterization of the zenana, then, is heavily nuanced, complex and dynamic—a complexity that is missing from Minault's unequivocal celebration of the

vibrancy of the zenana. In as much as a zenana is a communal space, a place for women to gather and socialize, it is also an imprisonment, a restrictive space that controls women's movement from space to space in the novel.

Heer herself sees the zenana as nothing more than her prison, inhabiting the paradoxical nature of the zenana as I am characterizing it. She may protest her confinement, but she does not reject the burqa, or the zenana, in its entirety. Even when she is not under the Pir's protection or influence, she continues to use the burqa to her advantage. The burqa, however, also remains paradoxical in the novel, as I have already suggested. It provides its wearer with anonymity and protection, but this very protection is subverted and (mis)used by characters for multiple reasons—Heer sees the burqa as a liberating force when the Pir takes her to the guesthouse via the narrow tunnel, only to realize that the same burqa cloaked her identity as the Pir's wife at the same time as it cloaked her body. She uses the same burqa to try to “expose” herself as the Pir's wife to her former rapists in an attempt to “disrobe” the shrine's secrets, only to find that the burqa's cloaking power could be used against her only too easily. However, she learns to revel in the anonymity it provides once her identity as the Pir's wife is obliterated completely; “concealed under a white *shuttlecock burqa*” (Durrani 229), Heer visits a shrine erected in her honour, and listens to peasants praising her attempts to expose the exploitation of Babaji's shrine, watching them place flowers on her grave with trepidation, realizing that her efforts to challenge and then demolish the shrine owner's reputation (and with it, the shrine) had been futile, for a new shrine had been erected (Durrani 230). Shrine worshipping continues uninterrupted, and with it the (possible) exploitation of people's beliefs and religion.

The novel's myriad veils conceal particular types of abuse, and showcase the multiplicity and the misogyny of religious power. Purdah is implemented through a system of double walls, interlinked courtyards, tunnels, heavily curtained cars and the burqa, all of which combine to guarantee that Heer is never exposed to strange men's gazes, and also ensures that the extent of Pir Sain's power is hidden from Heer herself<sup>81</sup> before she actually enters the zenana as a bride. This protection also makes Heer unrecognizable as the Pir's wife, as I have discussed already. Not only are the women physically veiled from prying eyes, the abuse they suffer is veiled under a heavy cloak of fear and silence—women who break the silence and try to seek justice for multiple rapes and physical abuse are publicly humiliated, flogged, even murdered. Heer's account of the different instances of women's abuse are littered with her protests against the system that sanctions violence against women, while simultaneously constructing a woman's honour as reflective of her family's, even her village's, honour. However, Heer's protests are against the use of Islam to further personal power, not against the religion itself. The problem, then, lies not with the injunctions of the religion, according to the novel, but with how those injunctions are interpreted and implemented.

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<sup>81</sup> The traditional ghunghat [bridal veil] covering Heer's face as she is transported from her mother's apartment to Pir Sain's village after her wedding celebrations, is one of the first manifestations of a veil through which Heer finds it impossible to catch a real glimpse of her groom's appearance, and by extension, of his power. The darkness surrounding her underneath the ghunghat is the first intimation of the cavernous, threatening nature of the strict purdah she is forced to observe as Pir Sain's wife.

### 3.6 Theorizing the Zenana in *Blasphemy*: Cavernous Spaces and Primary Enclosures

When Western liberal feminists address the issue of the veil and of the seclusion of women, the underlying message of that discussion is usually loud and clear—the veiling of women is perceived to be a symbol of the oppression of women, and is used to validate the Western Feminist as a liberated woman when compared to her underprivileged counterparts (Mohanty 22).<sup>82</sup> Even Heer views the segregation system itself as primarily oppressive, consistently seeking to change the shape of her world, trying to maintain contact with the “outside” world through other women. This (typical) characterization, when viewed alongside journalistic constructions<sup>83</sup> of the oppressiveness of the Muslim veil, leads most feminists to oppose the practice unequivocally. Sheila McDonough’s essay, “Perception of the *Hijab* in Canada”, for example, focuses on journalistic media and their constructions and perpetuation of a demonized vision of both the veil and the system that maintains it, highlighting an assumption of oppression and silenced femininity. McDonough suggests that the media persist in maintaining a one-dimensional view of the veil, denying the complexity of the

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<sup>82</sup> I use the term Western Feminist quite loosely to include feminists working in Europe and North America, and gesture towards the need to complicate the categorization of “Western vs. Eastern” women, as Chandra Mohanty has argued in her canonical essay “Under Western Eyes”. According to Mohanty, Western feminist scholarship constructs an image of the average, tradition-bound Third World woman, who leads a “truncated life” (22) based on her feminine gender, an image that then constitutes Western women as educated, and as having control over their own bodies and sexualities (22); i.e. we (Western feminists) are better off than them (Third World women) and must do everything in our power to rescue them from patriarchy.

<sup>83</sup> See work by Saba Mahmood (with Charles Hirschkind), Judith Ezekiel and Alia Al-Saji, as well as press coverage of France’s ban on the hijab in French public schools.

Muslim veil across multiple cultures.<sup>84</sup> McDonough argues that blanket critiques of Muslim cultures assume that the cultures are static and unchanging, an inference that needs to be challenged before an adequate response to the issue of the veil and women's rights can be articulated. Ghaiss Jasser's article demonstrates the need for this delicate balance between the perception of a veiled body and the discourse of patriarchal oppression when she declares herself unequivocally opposed to the veil in all its myriad shapes and forms. Jasser asserts that the veil is "an evil in itself" (196) and that it is important to lead a "campaign against the veil" (214). Even if Muslim women repeatedly assure their critics (and potential rescuers) that the veil has been adopted willingly (as Sajida Alvi et al and Homa Hoodfar<sup>85</sup> have shown), it is still viewed as a symbol of the backwardness of the Islamic world, as my discussion of Kingston's article has shown in my Introduction. The wearing of the veil in public is consistently defended by women through invocations of the historical, cultural and political contexts in which each type of veil is worn.<sup>86</sup> Attempts like McDonough's and Bullock's to defend the practice of

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<sup>84</sup> McDonough cites an article published in *Chatelaine* that uses the hijab-wearing figure of a Muslim woman to argue that a culture that seeks to hide its women from public view also hides domestic abuse behind closed doors, and brings a culture of male arrogance and intolerance with it—an assumption that is ostensibly upheld by the depiction of the zenana in *Blasphemy*.

<sup>85</sup> Both scholars interviewed women who chose to cover their heads with the hijab in North America. The scholars concluded that most Muslim women chose to wear the hijab to announce their religiosity and chastity, as well as to win concessions from their families—the wearing of the hijab signaled their chastity to their fathers and brothers, who would then raise no objections to their going out with their friends (for example) without male chaperonage.

<sup>86</sup> Katherine Bullock's work on the veil, for example, shows that the practice of veiling as it exists today has evolved over the centuries. She traces the historical view of the veiled, segregated Muslim woman during the colonization of the Middle East, arguing that the popular construction of the oppressed Muslim woman can be historically traced back to the frustration of the colonizer at not being able to see through the veil. Since the colonizer cannot see through the veil, s/he rejects the system itself as singularly oppressive,



veiling using socio-religious and historical examples, ignore and silence the voices of Muslim women who attempt to challenge and question the material impact of the practice on women's lives and mobility in social settings like the rural setting in *Blasphemy*. This is not to say that the historical and political contexts of the Islamic veil are not important. I am simply saying that many Western (and some Muslim) feminists tend to focus on one specific context and then generalize their conclusions to apply to a singular category that includes all Muslim women, regardless of differences in geographical or historical context. My approach to the veil, on the other hand, attempts to combine contextual and material frameworks with close-readings of texts and theoretical analyses in order to extrapolate (responsibly) my readings of the veil to similar locations and situations around Pakistan.

Durrani's novel reminds us that for many women, the purdah system itself is not the problem—the problem lies in the way it lends itself to manipulation at the hands of patriarchy, and the way in which it cloaks abuse and violence. Reading the novel alongside Luce Irigaray and Anne-Emmanuelle Berger helps me foreground instances where (and how) the veil can give agency to women, and where it takes that agency away. Durrani's *Blasphemy* is a direct challenge to the feminist approach that rejects purdah unequivocally. It includes an episode in which a white female journalist is introduced to the zenana only after she promises not to write about the Pir's women. Heer questions her, hoping that, being enlightened and free, she would have seen the ugly side

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reducing the import of the system in women's lives to (Muslim) patriarchy's attempt to control a woman's mobility, her right to the public sphere—the right to economic and social freedoms.

of the shrine and the Holy men. Gori [white woman] however, is full of adoration for the Pir, and Heer concludes that “the world was a fool and Gori represented it” (152). Heer had hoped that Gori would see the Pir as an abusive man, not as a dynamic religious leader, after meeting his wife and daughters, but instead, Gori is so enthralled by the Pir’s magnetism that she cannot see the material reality of life in the zenana. Heer had seen Gori’s visit as a chance to expose Pir Sain’s sadism, but when she meets the journalist, she sees the woman as a weak, coddled, protected woman, even though she was free to travel around the world. Heer describes Gori:

I noticed that Gori’s fair skin was too delicate. Surely it would char in the heat of our summer. It seemed to have borne kind winters with discomfort, in the sharp winds here, it would tear. Nor had she tasted the venom of a man, the poison inside Pir Sain would sting her to death. Gori seemed frail and helpless to me. Her world had made her weak. Mine had made me strong. (151)

Hoping to trade in Gori’s assumptions about the East and her own assumptions about free (and by extension strong) Western feminists, Heer learns, instead, that freedom and education does not necessarily provide the ability to see the “terror in [the women’s] eyes” (152). The visit, then “killed my need to fly. She [Gori] severed my lifeline to the outside world” (152). In as much as Heer tries desperately to construct an image of herself as the abused victim, she takes immense pride in her ability to not only survive, but do so with the help of women in her own zenana. She does not need the help of liberal feminists—even if that help had been forthcoming.

In the following section, I propose that *Blasphemy’s* specific characterization of the zenana and of the veil in the form of the chador and the all-enveloping burqa

complicates male and female domestic spaces, and the interactions of women who wear the veil with those enclosed spaces; the zenana and burqa confine and restrict mobility, separating men from women, but both also allow new types of alliances to form, alliances that then help women to challenge the violence and abuse that the zenana and the burqa seek to conceal. I depart from the instinct to reduce the zenana to a prison-like space (Sitara Khan) or to celebrate it unequivocally as a vibrant social space (Gail Minault) to show that the zenana, as well as the veil, both conceals, while simultaneously reveals, femininity and sexuality in specific ways, highlighting feminine presence at the same time as it makes the woman's body, her identity, invisible. My reading of Irigaray's refiguration of enclosed spaces alongside *Blasphemy's* nuanced and complex depiction of the zenana will help explicate the metaphorical revealing/concealing role of both the burqa and the zenana. As I have shown already, the zenana in *Blasphemy* is a multifaceted space, one in which women can congregate, even conduct secret love affairs—Heer falls in love with Kaali in the first few months of her marriage, and conducts a silent flirtation with her in the courtyard that lasts for months—but the bedroom that she shares with her husband is characterized as a cavernous hell, a space where she loses all vestiges of power. Heer's silent love affair with Kaali is conducted almost in Heer's imagination, for there are no covert expressions of love and adulation on the part of either of the two women. Heer latches on to Kaali's effervescent personality, her laughter, seeing her as the single ray of sunshine in an otherwise dark life. Having Kaali near her, in the same room, makes the chores easier for Heer, and she imagines the other women in the courtyard watching the two women, waiting for a chance to find the one mistake that would get the two in trouble. The (imaginary) flirtation with Kaali sets

up a clear distinction between the courtyard and the bedroom, where the courtyard (and the kitchen) becomes a space of escape, of pleasure, even sexual release (even if only in Heer's own imagination) and the bedroom becomes the cavernous and imprisoning enclosure, full of danger and sexual violence, dominated as it is by Pir Sain's presence. The tension between these two spaces is the key to the paradox of the zenana that I grapple with in the following section.

### 3.6.1 *Purdah and Hijab: Etymological link to Enclosures*

Anne-Emmanuelle Berger presents a politico-historical view of the Muslim veil, explicated through Luce Irigaray's conceptualization of the veil itself, in her essay, "The Newly Veiled Woman: Irigaray, Specularity, and the Islamic Veil." She focuses on Irigaray's notion of Specularity, and the veil, or veiling, as concealing agent, a theoretical focus that complicates Jasser's reading of the veil as merely a historically situated patriarchal agent of subjugation, and helps illustrate Heer's own complex relationship with the burqa.

Berger focuses on the current practice adopted by Muslim women in North America of wearing a scarf to cover their heads, usually called the hijab, adopted willingly and shows that when used within the Quranic context, the word hijab refers to a curtain dividing men from women,<sup>87</sup> allowing an interaction between the two without revealing the woman's body to the male gaze.<sup>88</sup> The function of the hijab is to act as

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<sup>87</sup> Thus, the Arabic word hijab and the urdu/Persian word purdah both refer to the same concept: a physical, spatial barrier between men and women.

<sup>88</sup> See my discussion of Stowasser's historical and etymological explanation of how the word hijab evolved to denote women's clothing practices.

both: a barrier between men and women, as well as an object that is designed to conceal the household of the Prophet, as Berger shows (104). The Pir in *Blasphemy* views himself as a representation of God and His Prophet in this world, and thus claims for himself the exalted status of the Prophet. The injunction to make his wives invisible is followed strictly.<sup>89</sup> According to Berger, it is the hijab, or the curtain, that defines the very nature of the space it is designed to conceal, while simultaneously revealing the nature of the very thing it is to conceal—femininity (Berger 104). As Papanek shows,

Women's proper behavior, as sheltered persons, becomes an important measure of the status of their protectors, and the achievement of symbolic shelter is valued by the man as a measure of control over his environment. In a culture where male pride is a very significant... element of identity and status, the seclusion of women is an important aspect of male control. (193)

I have already shown the complex ideological and social implications of the veiling and segregation system. The system is rooted deeply in Islamic religious dogma, but owes as much, or more, to the patriarchal interpretations and implementation of that dogma, as well as to women's compliance. The complex psycho-social impact of the system itself on Pakistani rural women who (are often forced to) practice it, however, has been left unexamined, which is where I hope to intervene, by examining the veiling system in light

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<sup>89</sup> When tracing the etymological roots of the Arabic word hijab, Berger examines the Quranic verse that commands the Prophet Muhammad to shield his wives from the public behind a hijab (see surah 33 ayah 53 cited in my Introduction). She asserts that this verse is used by Muslims to justify the veiling and segregation of women. She does not, however, acknowledge class and socio-economic factors that influence and nuance segregation practices by Muslims in different parts of the world. It is important to reiterate that Heer is confined to a physical space, while other, more "lowly" women are allowed to come and go as they please.

of Irigaray's contemplations on veils and the specular dimensions of sexual difference. By tracing the etymological roots of the word hijab to the concept of barriers and curtains, Berger helps me establish an etymological connection between hijab and purdah, both of which function in a similar manner: a barrier between consecrated space and non-religious space. In *Blasphemy*, the spatial division is not represented symbolically by the scarf on a woman's head, but is a literal cave-like space that seemingly exists to trap women in rural Pakistan. The following section on Berger's re-reading of Irigaray's *Speculum*, counterbalanced with my own questioning of Irigaray's conceptualization of cavernous feminine spaces, will help establish a link between the revealing-concealing function performed by the burqa (which Heer and other women wear when they leave the zenana, and which Heer tries to exploit) and the complex characterization of the zenana as a simultaneous refuge and prison for women in *Blasphemy*.

Berger shows that Luce Irigaray sees the feminine practice of applying make-up and adornments as a form of veiling, and hence, as women's internalization of male fetishization of the female body. According to Berger, the Muslim practice of veiling fetishizes the female body in a similar manner, with the difference lying in the in/visibility of women. Where make-up, jewelry and provocative modes of dressing adopted by women in the West make them intensely visible, the Muslim practice of veiling seeks to render the same body *invisible*. As Berger points out, the very failure of the practice arises from the fact that Muslim women actually remain far from invisible in this economy. They become the objects of male desire, viewed as a package that needs to be unwrapped, while at the same time being viewed as objects to be pitied by Western

feminists. Berger cites Fanon's discourse about the veil, where European men picture the veil as the wrapping of merchandise (111),<sup>90</sup> leading to sexual fantasies about intercourse with not one veiled woman, but many: "The veil means that women can substitute for one another ad infinitum" (Berger 111).<sup>91</sup>

As I have noted earlier in this section, Berger links the contemporary use of the word hijab to denote the head scarf worn by Muslim women in North America etymologically to the concept of curtains and consecrated space versus non-religious space. This connection complicates the wearing of a head scarf, and invests Muslim women's role with a particular kind of religiosity, effectively distinguishing Muslim, consecrated space (designated literally by the curtain covering Muslim women's heads) from the rest of the non-religious world.<sup>92</sup> According to Berger, the hijab-wearing Muslim woman in public announces her religiosity by veiling herself, and at the same time, the act of veiling "enclose[s] the community of believers, sealing off their identity as Muslims...it also underlines women's irreducible specificity and responsibility for achieving the community's identity" (104). This logic recalls, for Berger, Irigaray's

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<sup>90</sup> I have discussed Fanon's contemplations on Algeria's veiled Muslim women in detail in my first chapter

<sup>91</sup> Berger extends Fanon's argument to assert that the veiled woman effectively removes herself from the libidinal economy, refusing to live up to the expectations of the male gazer. The colonizer, then, creates an imagined "world of mystery, of the hidden" (Fanon 43), which can also be potentially demonized (what are they hiding?). By asserting that the veil (or the hijab in this context) is adopted willingly, as a political strategy on the part of the veiled woman to consciously remove herself from the libidinal economy, Berger invests the act of veiling with a particular amount of choice, which, in turn, gestures towards a level of education and awareness of the libidinal economy, an awareness that may not necessarily be present in the rural Pakistani context. Thus, I proceed with caution, aware of the fact that the current use of Irigaray's conceptualizations of the veil, and Berger's uptake of them, are not devoid of contextual pitfalls. A woman who dons the veil at maturity, to signal to the world that she does, indeed, belong to the Muslim tradition, relies heavily on the correct interpretation of that signal. If the context of the symbolic gesture is switched, then the interpretation and the connotations of the veil should be switched as well.

<sup>92</sup> This non-religious world, at times, may also include Muslim women who choose not to cover.

refiguration of woman as “receptacle” in “Western philosophical tradition [that] she attempts to uncover in *Speculum*” (104). Unlike Irigaray’s characterization, where “woman as receptacle” signifies sexual difference due to a lack (of the phallus), the figuration of women hijab-wearers as receptacles of religious identity signifies a presence (of femininity, female sexuality) as well as announces the boundary between a community of believers (Muslims) and non-believers (non-Muslims), thus highlighting the importance of presence (of both “Muslim” and of “woman”) instead of absence and lack, which is key to Irigaray’s contemplations on the feminine as “receptacle”. Thus the veil, is predicated on the premise of invisibility of the woman while simultaneously highlighting the presence of a sacred, religious enclosure that helps distinguish believers from non-believers. Women who wear the veil, then, according to Berger, “are in charge of figuring Islam’s ‘difference’, hence identity, but they must do so at the expense of their, or a, sexual identity, the renunciation of which is figured by the covering (specularization) of their sexed body” (104-105). Since the sexed body must be hidden, covered in public space, then, the same body would presumably be “free” when in domestic space. *Blasphemy*’s characterization of the zenana, however, figures the domestic space as particularly dangerous, and that too because of uncontrolled male sexuality, surrounded as it is by female sexed bodies that are only partially veiled and/or covered. As I have discussed already, not only is Heer’s body hidden from view behind the walls of the zenana and the fabric of the burqa, but her identity, her sense of self is also subverted and smothered. The success of the purdah system, and patriarchy’s manipulation of it within the novel, hinges on the premise that no one outside the zenana has any idea what Heer (as Pir Sain’s wife) actually looks like. When Heer (as well as the



household's women) visit the holy shrine on Thursdays, her burqa announces her presence, while simultaneously ensuring Heer's anonymity—Heer can never lift the veil while in public, so even though everyone around her knows that Pir Sain's wife is in a specific place, they do not know who Heer actually is, or what she looks like, highlighting the complex interplay between presence-absence encapsulated within the symbolism of the hijab articulated by Berger. This interplay is also significantly threatening for Heer, but simultaneously liberating, life-saving, for her.

Where Berger (and Irigaray) discuss the figurative curtain, or consecrated space, *Blasphemy* literalizes that space. The womb-like enclosure<sup>93</sup> is not represented symbolically by the scarf on a woman's head, but is a literal snare, a trap for Heer. Heer and the women who frequent the zenana find within it a particular kind of refuge at the same time as they recognize it as the means of their imprisonment. The burqa, for example, reveals as much as it conceals—those who view it enveloping a body are intensely aware of the feminine sexuality concealed within it, which produces an effect of hyper-visibility of female sexuality at the same time as it makes the woman herself invisible. The zenana, the multiple veils, also enable and shroud Pir Sain's sexual appetite, allowing him to reduce women to objects of desire, wrapped by veils that he can unwrap at leisure in the cavernous "sanctity" of his bedroom. This play on in/visibility, on revealing-concealing, is reminiscent of Irigaray's description of the curtains surrounding a child's (Ernst) bed in her discussion of Freud's fort/da episode in "Belief

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<sup>93</sup> I am referring to Irigaray's re-reading of Plato's cave-myth. I will discuss Irigaray's conceptualization, and its implications for the zenana in detail in the next section.

Itself”, while the cavernous, strictly feminine nature of the zenana—with its characterization as a prison in *Blasphemy*—is reminiscent of Irigaray’s re-figuration of Plato’s cave myth in *Speculum*, in which Irigaray’s metaphorization of the curtain-wall-wall-ette and the divisions created by it highlight the importance of maintaining gender segregation in a libidinal economy that hinges on exploiting female sexuality at the same time as it suppresses it. I deploy Irigaray’s metaphor of the wall-wall-ette to re-figure the veil (and by extension the zenana in *Blasphemy*) as an enclosure that is necessary for the protection it provides to the women enveloped by it, but also one that is controlled by men, which makes it a paradoxical space.

### 3.6.2 *Irigaray’s Conceptualization of Enclosures and the Veil-Curtain*

In “Plato’s Hystera,” the curtain-wall-veil is the sole agent of concealment and separation. Irigaray focuses on Plato’s cave myth and redefines the cave as a female, womb-like<sup>94</sup> space that can be entered only through a vagina-like narrow passage. Men in the cave are fixed in one position, forced to face the back of the womb-cave, facing straight ahead, forced to watch shadows cast on the wall, which they take to be reality. The shadows are manipulated by another group of men separated from the first group by a low wall, which Irigaray describes as a “little wall, *teikhion*...barring the road, the way, the passage. A small wall, a wall-ette, built by man, that cannot be crossed or breached, that separates and divides without any possibility of access from the other side” (“Plato” 248). This wall is then connected to the concept of veils and veiling, as, according to

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<sup>94</sup> Elin Diamond, in her essay “Mimesis, Mimicry, and the ‘True-Real’” asserts that the “cave as embedded enclosure becomes the womb, or *hystera*, embedded in the mother’s body/earth” (370).

Irigaray, Plato compares this diminutive, flimsy wall to a curtain or veil (249). The “wallcurtain” then, by its very nature, and in spite of its flimsy nature implied by the diminutive term used for it, divides two worlds, a division that is never to be transgressed. Irigaray’s re-figuration of this myth, hinges on the fact that (a) the wall is diminutive, “thin, light, wholly unrelated to the massive walls around a city” (Irigaray 248) and (b) that the wall is built by man (248). The flimsy wallcurtain contains within itself the potential to be penetrated, but never is. In Irigaray’s reading, the wallcurtain functions as the impenetrable, but rather flimsy, hymen. Men enter the cave-womb through a narrow tunnel-vagina, never to leave again, one which inverts the entire female anatomy quite strangely. Here, the hymen/wall-ette/wallcurtain can never be broken/transgressed in spite of the flimsiness implied by the diminutive term—*teikhion*, wall-ette—used for it. It acts as a barrier between free and chained men; those who built the wall-ette, “the men who have raised it [are prevented] from having access to the back of the cave” (“Plato” 249) which is where the chained men exist. Since Irigaray characterizes the space itself as feminine (it is womb-like), it is tempting to translate Plato’s cave as the zenana in *Blasphemy*, where the “prisoners” or the “chained men” are not men, but women, and where the wall-ette is the partial wall that “protects” the entrance to the courtyard which is a part of the Pir’s zenana. My aim, however, is to take the analysis a step further, for the zenana in *Blasphemy* is more than a prison-like space, and the women (as well as men) who interact with it are controlled by a single man’s powerful will. Heer characterizes herself as the “weak leader of a weaker pack” (105) and characterizes the women who are “free” to leave the zenana at the end of the workday as women who were not free at all for their poverty, their families, bound them inextricably

to the Shrine (105). However, the zenana is also the one space where women can, at times, exchange stories (even if those stories were of abuse and humiliation at the hands of men) and find comfort in each other's company. Even though Heer hates the donning of the burqa when she travels between her bedroom and the guest house, she revels in the anonymity the same veil provides when she visits the shrine erected in her honour at the end of the novel, underlining the political expediency of claiming the "protection" of the portable closet.

Even though the socio-historical context of the novel is completely different from that of Berger and even Irigaray, it characterizes the veil and the zenana's enclosure in a manner similar to Irigaray's enclosures that are each feminine and impenetrable in their nature, but controlled by men, and consistently penetrated by them. The novel regularly plays on acts of revelation and concealment, attempting to strike a balance between unveiling some aspects of the story to the reader, while hiding other aspects, presenting the story through a narrator who cannot be trusted completely. While describing Pir Sain's funeral procession, for example, at the beginning of the novel, Heer tells us that "Although I [Heer] had never seen the outside of my home, I had imagined the narrow, winding dirt tracks to be long and thin, like slithering snakes and here and there a dry bush. A few shacks, a shop, the *jagirdar's* [landowner] big house, his mango orchards, and a long sweeping curve wiggled all around the Haveli [mansion]. Passing a hand pump and a tube well, the procession must have reached the shrine" (17). Heer begins with a declaration of distance—telling her readers that she had never seen the area surrounding her home—but as she begins to describe the village the way she had imagined it, the tense shifts, and the narrative becomes more authoritative. It shifts from

“I had imagined” to confident descriptions of dirt tracks that were snake-like, and then moves on to a listing of specific elements: mango orchards that surround the landowner’s mansion in a sweeping curve that is also somehow threatening (they wiggled around the haveli), as well as descriptions of a tube-well and a hand pump. She finishes her description of the procession with a declaration that it “must have reached the shrine” almost as if she had timed the entire procession precisely. Her opening caveat—that she had never actually seen what she was about to describe—rings somewhat false, forcing us to acknowledge that Heer defines our view, our perspective on the events being narrated, restricting our vision, forcing us to remain within the confines of the zenana with Heer. In her subsequent (re)tellings, Heer continues to construct herself as the unwilling participant in, and victim of, an overwhelmingly powerful patriarchy, a narrative in which all women are weak and utterly powerless. She tells her readers that she was helpless under the watchful eyes of Cheel, and justifies her own abuse of her (relative) power (when she brings Yathimri, a twelve year-old girl, into her bedroom and offers her to Pir Sain to distract him from her daughter) as an act of self-defense, learning to drink alcohol and to comply with Pir Sain’s sexual demands (Durrani 122-123). When Yathimri begins to gloat about her ability to sexually please Pir Sain, Heer slaps Yathimri, “furious that their [maid-servants’] fear of Yathimri was more than their fear of me” (117) and complains about her behavior to Pir Sain, who beats Yathimri. When the latter looks to Heer for comfort, Heer admits that her “heart did not bleed” (118). Clearly broken and abused, all women in the zenana are forced to compete against each other, sacrificing other women’s bodies to save their own. Much like Irigaray’s delineation of the womb-like cave, the zenana in *Blasphemy* is a cavernous space, specifically feminine,

but controlled by men, and exploited by the women who inhabit it. Heer continuously resists her imprisonment, but also learns to use the little power she has as Pir Sain's wife in order to survive. The blurb on the book jacket asserts that

*Blasphemy* is a serious comment on the challenge faced by Muslim societies.

*Blasphemy* is a commentary, not on Islam but on the struggle of a Muslim woman against all that is contrary to what Islam stands for. [It] is a combination of fact and fiction, blending to disguise and protect the victims of a horrible human tragedy, while exposing the powerful religious impostors who prey on the wretched and powerless people.

This is not to say that the sole purpose of the zenana, (as well as Irigaray's conception of it) is to restrict and confine women, or to pit women against one another so that patriarchal control over their lives can be maintained. Such a statement places this chapter at risk of crystallizing the concept of veils into one theoretical precept. My aim, here, is to highlight the nature of the physical space of the zenana as it has been characterized within the novel: the enclosure of the zenana enables domestic violence and sexual transgressions, but the same enclosure also endeavors to interrupt, and trouble, the violence, for it is abused women who band together to somehow seek revenge, in spite of their weakness and powerlessness. Heer gets the help of her jailor—Cheel—to murder her husband, and gets Tara's help to leave the zenana every night in a (failed) attempt to expose the Pir's perversity after his death.

In *Blasphemy*, the segregation is quite specific, meant to be impenetrable, and inaccessible for every male except for Heer's husband, who, being a sufi pir, has access to the entire zenana. The courtyard, for Heer, becomes the cave-like enclosure and she

herself becomes the imprisoned spectator. Except, here, she is not just a spectator, but an unwilling (at times, also willing) participant in the action. She even takes on the role of the puppeteers (in Plato's cave, casting shadows on the back wall of the cave) at different points in the novel. In spite of her lengthy ruminations about the "evil" that she is "forced" to participate in, even orchestrate (by bringing in young girls for Pir Sain, allowing him to cast her as a prostitute for his own voyeurism) we find it hard to trust her narration of her "self as victim". Unlike Spivak's feminine subaltern who cannot speak, unless through the inscription of her death (313)<sup>95</sup> not only does Heer speak out, she does so in a specific, rebellious, way, intensely aware of her own role as the informer. By deliberately "making the world round" through her narration, by taking pride in her ability to survive against all-odds (unlike the Pir Sain's previous two wives) Heer successfully exposes the violence of patriarchal power, while simultaneously winning over (an imagined Westernized) audience.

The set-up of the courtyard within the novel is such that it reminds one forcibly of Irigaray's womb-cave, and in fact, seems to be the practical application of what Irigaray imagined as a specifically female space. For Irigaray, once the womb-cave is entered, one cannot leave again, unless one can somehow find enlightenment, turn around and see the source light; only then can the spell be broken. The images that are cast on the wall are taken to be real by the chained spectators (but are not real, only shadows, mere

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<sup>95</sup> In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak presents the example of a nationalist activist, Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, who hangs herself. Entrusted with the task of assassinating a politically powerful personality, but finding it impossible to do so, Bhaduri hangs herself while menstruating, clearly aware that her suicide would be mis-read as shame for (a possible) unwanted pregnancy. Spivak reads Bhaduri's act of suicide while menstruating as her attempt at re-writing the social text of death/suicide in an interventionist way. I read Heer's rebellious act—of telling her own story—in a similar manner.

representations of the originary forms), “for to the prisoners no origin of the image projections is imaginable; ... what they experience as origin is always already mimicry, a representation of repetition” (Diamond 370). While discussing Irigaray’s cave analogy, Elin Diamond reads the cave as a theatrical space, one that is significantly fractured and one that enables mimesis and mimicry, but mimicry that functions “as an alienation-effect, framing the gender behavior dictated by patriarchal models as a means...” (Diamond 373) of recuperating the woman’s (womb’s)<sup>96</sup> exploitation. Since the “real” and the “true” get fractured in this space (for the chained spectators in the cave experience the reflections, the shadows as originary), mimesis in itself, as a reflection, a mimicry of the “original” is questioned and “hand[ed] over to women” (Diamond 373). Diamond points out that mimesis, for a woman moves “from ‘subordination’ to ‘affirmation,’ from ‘play’ to ‘recover[y]’” (373). This kind of move is only possible in a specific type of space, one that enables mimesis to become mimicry,<sup>97</sup> a feminine enclosure into a theatrical, and hence resistive, space. The question, here, then is: is the story real? If it is, then for whom is it real?

*Blasphemy’s* claims to authority (through its claims to truth, reality in spite of its fictionalization of that reality) sets up the narration of Heer’s story in this specific mimetic realm—it is a mimesis of a true-real story, that recounts, in vivid detail,

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<sup>96</sup> In Irigaray’s delineation, the cave itself is read as a woman’s body, a feminine space, but no women are actually present inside the cave. The chained spectators, and the puppet-masters are all men.

<sup>97</sup> Elin Diamond draws a distinction between mimesis and mimicry, and shows that mimesis is the “truthful relation between world and word, model and copy, nature and image...in which potential difference is subsumed by sameness” (363). Diamond retheorizes mimesis as a “site of, and means of, feminist intervention” (368) which would enable a “mimicry that undermines the referent’s authority” (368).



domestic abuse and violence in a fractured zenana, but at the same time, the novel maintains a distinction between truth (it happened) and fiction (I [Heer] will tell what happened). The fact that *Blasphemy* is one woman's (Heer's) narration of what is purported to be a true event, makes Heer's narration of her "real" experiences of life as a sufi pir's wife a mimetic (one that is a mimicry, not a mimesis) account of that truth, filtered as it is through her *impressions* of life in the zenana. Heer can just as easily be cast in the role of the puppeteers manipulating the shadows on the wall, making us, the readers the chained spectators. I read Heer's act of narration of her true-real life experiences with Pir Sain as her subversive mimicry; her narration of her life is her (symbolic) rebellion. Heer takes great pains to set herself up as the victim of the Pir's violence, and makes excuses for her own complicity in the sexual violence, telling her readers that she had to do whatever was possible to survive. *Blasphemy's* account of a specific type of (fractured) zenana, and a new type of female agency, then has "the disruptive potential of Irigaray's concept of mimicry" (Diamond 376) for it deliberately ruptures, interrupts a reading of the Muslim zenana as either a violent, abusive space, or a liberating one (as Minault has shown). At the moment that the novel validates a sense of female helplessness—no woman can hope to escape the confines of the zenana, or the violence—it also enables women's collective agency, one that is predicated on women's communal power, and their ability to band together to get rid of (some of) the patriarchal forces that perpetrate violence in the name of religion. The zenana in *Blasphemy* appears to be impenetrable, but is instead permeable. The bedroom is connected to the outside world via a long dark tunnel, to which Heer is denied access as it is locked from the outside. Once Heer enters the womb-cave as a married woman, she cannot leave again

and only her husband can come and go as he pleases, until she finds a reason, and a way, to finally escape her imprisonment. Interestingly, it is the Pir himself who presents Heer with the key to the locked closet, by allowing her to use the tunnel as a means to leave her womb-cave, even though it is ostensibly for his own sexual satisfaction.

### 3.7 Conclusion

The veil functions both as a literal, material imprisonment, as well as a complex metaphor within Durrani's novel. Wearing the veil in the Muslim context to shield the woman's body from a male (potential predator) gaze has been questioned, and even vehemently opposed, by most Liberal feminists, as my discussion of Jasser has shown. Such questioning, however, denies the specificity, the experience itself, of veiling the body, as *Blasphemy's* complex representation of the zenana and the burqa shows. Irigaray's shifting metaphor of the veil-curtain, and Berger's link between contemporary veiling practices and the original use of the word hijab establishes a clear connection between what has normally been perceived as two opposing perceptions of veiling—western and eastern. As Irigaray herself has shown, the veil, by virtue of its ephemeral nature, connects two spaces<sup>98</sup> more than it divides, revealing more than it conceals, highlighting sexuality at the very moment it is supposed to be cloaked.

*Blasphemy* appears to question the practice of secluding women at first glance, with Heer consistently longing to break free of her confinement, to interact with the world on her own terms. However, as stated earlier, veiling itself is not questioned. The

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<sup>98</sup> In *Blasphemy*, the zenana seems to exist in a vacuum, as Heer is never allowed to leave its confines. However, the wall-ette divides the zenana, Heer's world, from the Pir's world, of which Heer knows very little.

fabric enclosure, the burqa, appears as a protective agent in the final pages of the novel, affording Heer the anonymity necessary for her to visit other men as well as her own grave, which also emphasizes Heer's incredible ability to survive the Pir Sain's sadism. In fact, Berger has shown that women in Egypt, for example, view the veil as "the price [they] have to pay to maintain themselves on the market" (105). Wearing the veil, thus, becomes the portable curtain, the fabric closet that allows women to move in the "world of men" freely, without sacrificing their religious principles. The veil itself, then, is the site of negotiation between intense seclusion and complete exposure. Heer may wish to break through the actual, physical wall that surrounds and imprisons her, but she does not, cannot, question the veil covering her body. Each time she lifts her veil to "expose" herself, she is punished quite severely, until she learns to accept the protection the veil affords her. With its geographical and historical focus on rural Pakistan of the 1980's, the novel helps re-figure the veil and the zenana as complex institutions—ones that are challenged and resisted, but also celebrated and used for personal gain. Heer may wish to escape the courtyard, and manages to do just that, but she finds that complete and utter rejection of the veil itself may not be possible. This poses a serious challenge to blanket statements of feminist scholars like Jasser, who unequivocally oppose the Muslim veil. Instead, Irigaray's metaphorization of the curtain-veil-wall as a revealing-concealing agent that is necessary to maintain spatial divisions in the libidinal economy seem more apt. By donning the "veil" Muslim women lay claim to public (male) space, viewing it as the necessary price to pay for the transgression of the wall between the zenana and public space.

## Chapter 3

### 4 Crumbling Architecture, Restructuring Lives: The Role of Domestic Architecture in Maniza Naqvi's *Mass Transit*

#### 4.1 Introduction<sup>99</sup>

Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* shows the impact of purdah rules on women's mobility in a rural context and constructs the home, the *zenana* as a complex space that both sanctions (and hides) patriarchal violence and allows women to form new types of alliances with each other. The following discussion of Maniza Naqvi's *Mass Transit* (1998) will delve into a re-figuration of the (non)implementation of purdah rules in a vastly different context—Karachi, Pakistan's major sea-port and a distinctly metropolitan city, developed by the British during the mid-nineteenth century. My analysis of *Mass Transit* will show that "home" as a site and place, as well as a woman's "place of belonging" becomes a particularly complex space, given the rules of veiling and segregation in Pakistan, especially in the 1990's. Unlike *Blasphemy*, the novel *Mass Transit* does not actually take veiling and segregation as its main theme. Instead, it focuses on the (im)mobility of women in Karachi, and delves into domestic architecture and space-defining tools like small walls and fabric sheets, to highlight the impact of class, religion and social status on how veiling and segregation rules are implemented and interpreted. The following discussion will bring architectural organization of a particular

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<sup>99</sup> An earlier draft of this chapter was published as: "Eternal Exiles in the Land of the Pure: *Mohajirs* in *Mass Transit*." *Partitioned Lives: Narratives of Home, Displacement and Re-Settlement*. Eds. Nandi Bhatia and Anjali Gera-Roy. New Delhi: Pearson-Longman, 2008. 214-226.

domestic space into the foreground to demonstrate the apparent flexibility, and the complex interpretations of Islamic rules of veiling and segregation in Karachi. The novel presents an image of a fractured home, one that is not as specifically gendered as *Blasphemy*, but one that is characterized by specific, gendered, distinctly feminine spaces that are also intrinsically liminal and transitional.

*Mass Transit*, is grounded in the political and historical contexts of the city of Karachi as well as those of an internally divided/sectioned house, both of which form the central theme—that of gendered organization of a built space. The novel makes key contributions to the debates surrounding issues of space and gender in a Pakistani context—showing that Islamic injunctions about gender segregation define how a particular domestic space is organized—while simultaneously demonstrating the real effects of gender-segregation rules on the lives of women in Karachi, and in the process, intrinsically troubles the notion of the zenana as either a vibrant social space, or a repressive one.

Using Karachi, a major metropolitan city, as the setting for the family drama, the novel traces the daily lives of, and interactions between, three families housed in a sprawling but rapidly disintegrating mansion-like home that maintains a façade of unity while concealing internal architectural divisions that keep the different families within it integrally segregated. I will analyze key architectural features of the main family home—the space defining “chandnis”,<sup>100</sup> hastily built dividing walls and different stairwells and

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<sup>100</sup> The word is literally translated as moonlight and refers to white sheets typically spread over carpets and floors during large gatherings (weddings, funerals) to designate areas for guests to congregate. The sheets

staircases—as described in the novel, to show that specific architectural settings define and confine women’s interactions with their homes as well as with co-inhabitants. The chapter will begin with an account of the effects of domestic spatial organization and dividing mechanisms (fabric sheets and small walls) on women and will then move on to the impact of a specific type of spatial organization of the city (Karachi) on women’s mobility and interactions with different built spaces—both public and domestic buildings. Although the novel keeps the protagonist Safina’s house/home in the foreground, her experiences in the offices of Urban Planning and Development in the United States colour her perceptions of both her home and her city. She sees herself as the one who can help those less fortunate, going so far as to volunteer at a local medical clinic, counseling women slum-dwellers on the importance of proper nutrition and hygiene, never once realizing that most women she talks to are not interested in what she has to offer. I will analyze specific moments in the novel that foreground the interactions of Safina with her built environments and her attempts at controlling them—for example her attempts at scrubbing the mosaic tiles of the *gole kamra* (round room) to return the floor to its remembered luster, or her purchase of expensive potted plants that are placed along the wall dividing her courtyard to mask its ugliness—in order to highlight the complexity of Safina’s interactions with her home. Along the way, I will bring into play Safina’s travels through Karachi, as well as her remembered navigations through Washington. The

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spread on the floor are always sparkling white, and no one steps on them with shoes on. I will discuss the significance of the *chandnis* and the implication of the sheets, later in this chapter.

novel's focus remains on mobility (as indicated by its title) and yet the major theme becomes one of *immobility*, or, more specifically, of gendered immobility. I propose that the novel's unrelenting focus on the domestic spaces of the women who interact with Safina, as well as its focus on the (im)mobility of those women, highlights the system of segregation and veiling that organizes both the structures of private, domestic space and the built environments of the city. The system of veiling and segregation in the novel restricts women's mobility in specific ways, imprisoning them and confining them to domestic structures regardless of class. Even Safina, who believes she is "free" of the segregation system and its intrinsic hold on women's mobility, is forced to acknowledge not only her own powerlessness, but also her complicity in the maintenance of the gender segregation system.

The city and the house are both organized along a distinct model of men's and women's roles in an Islamic society, the assumption being that women's space is to be the domestic space. That particular gendered organization of the cityscape<sup>101</sup> is exacerbated by Islam's demands for specific, different, yet complementary, gendered roles. As my discussion of the veiling and segregation rules has shown already, Islam has constituted a specific social system, one that assigns the domestic sphere to the woman and the public sphere to the man. This demand for segregation changes the organization of both the city and of domestic architecture in specific ways, as demonstrated by the need for a separate space for women—the *zenana*—within the home. My chapter will delve into the domestic organization as depicted in the novel to show that even though

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<sup>101</sup> I will address this gendering later in the section entitled "Gendering a Metropolitan City".

Safina chooses not to veil her body with fabric, the organization of the city itself forces her into specific gendered spaces, closeting, and simultaneously controlling, her femininity. As I navigate through the spaces of the novel, I will explicate my specific deployment of the architectural “closet” and will show that the “chador aur chardewari” principles, as they are interpreted and implemented in Karachi since Zia’s dictatorship, create spaces inside the house that are akin to the “closeting away” of femininity and of women’s sexuality, spaces that are particularly successful in rendering women immobile. With its focus on space-defining fabric sheets (chandnis) and on small dividing walls used to segregate certain sections of the sprawling mansion, the novel complicates the notion that the domestic space is a woman’s domain. Instead, the novel suggests that the home, in a Pakistani context, is a fractured space at best, one that limits and confines women to liminal, interstitial, specifically transient spaces, an assertion that I will explicate through my discussion of Homi Bhabha’s conceptualization of interstitiality. For Bhabha, interstitiality is a state of hybridized identity<sup>102</sup> which is founded upon, located in, specific architectural spaces—corridors, stairwells and even doorways.

The implication of Bhabha’s conceptualization of third space and interstitial identity is that liminal spaces, interstitial locations and hybrid identities are states of identifications to be celebrated, to be used for politically conscious creativity. However, the conceptualization of interstitial identity in Bhabha’s writings cannot be crystallized

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<sup>102</sup> In his Introduction to *Location of Culture*, Bhabha discusses British Muslims and other displaced populations negotiating different traditions and processes, creating new traditions and customs in an attempt to formulate a new hyphenated identity. The new interstitial identity, existing as it does in-between and along the gaps in cultural identifications, contains within it traces of the different cultural affiliations, and is a conscious process of identity formation.



into one singular precept.<sup>103</sup> I posit that the novel's characterization of the spaces created by the chandnis invokes the concept of the interstitial in the way that Bhabha uses it, but it also highlights the impermanence of third space, which in turn may not be something to celebrate. Liminality, third space and interstitiality could just as well work to marginalize and silence, to disempower rather than empower a woman. In Naqvi's novel, for example, the chandnis are characterized as liminal spaces, fabric floor coverings that create a "circle of light" (Naqvi viii) and keep the darkness at bay (Naqvi viii), but the chandnis are also transient spaces—they are to be used for a specific purpose and on a specific occasion, and once the chandni is removed, the space re-gains its "original" function. Similarly, the wall and the canopy in Safina's courtyard are dividing objects that are impenetrable in their function, but are flimsy in nature, transient and ephemeral, containing the potential for their own rupture. The flimsiness of these spatial divisions can be linked directly to my discussions of the (intended) purposes of the zenanas and zenana-like spaces in Pakistani-Muslim households. I have shown in my introduction already that the domestic space in a Muslim household is automatically divided along gendered lines—with spaces demarcated by curtains, walls, even by the veil on a woman's head. *Mass Transit* does not highlight the wearing of a veil, nor does it focus on the veil enveloping a woman's body—none of the female characters are described as

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<sup>103</sup> Since he maintains a focus on immigration from the East (postcolonial countries) to the West (North America and Europe) one wonders if any person who migrates from one place to another can be considered an interstitial hybrid. Is creative output or creative re-imagining of one's identity a pre-condition for interstitial identification?

actually donning the veil in its myriad forms<sup>104</sup>—but its focus on architectural divisions highlights the impact of the veiling and segregation system on women’s lives. Even if a woman does not veil her body with fabric, social, architectural, and economic norms confine a woman’s mobility in specific ways.

## 4.2 Summary of *Mass Transit*

*Mass Transit* seeks to address the problems faced by the city of Karachi in the late 1980’s, attempts to provide a history of the city, attacks issues of class and economic privilege, gestures towards the violence that erupts periodically in the city, and even attempts to provide a glimpse of life in the zenana with a focus on women’s status as wives in different economic groups. With its myriad themes, and multiple voices, the novel has been treated as “largely plotless, driven more by its own dynamic of autocritique than by any novelistic action” (“Mass Transit” 828) by reviewers like Fawzia Afzal-Khan. Afzal-Khan goes on to assert that the “curious mélange of points of view both unsettles the reader because of the erratic suddenness of the shifts and, paradoxically, also helps ‘ground’ the reader in the *writer’s sensibility*, which is precisely that of an *outsider looking in*<sup>105</sup> as well as of a *native informant* looking out, and hence innately unsettling and unraveling itself” (“Mass Transit” 828; my emphasis). I argue, however, that far from being plotless and “meandering” the novel presents a crucial

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<sup>104</sup> There are instances in the novel where women’s veiling practices are specifically foregrounded to show that class dictates veiling practices and seclusion, but the novel does not describe what the women wear in their daily lives. However, it can be assumed that the women are not unveiled. Given the novel’s setting—1990’s Karachi—most women probably wear the chador or the dupatta in various configurations.

<sup>105</sup> I will discuss the characterization of Safina’s transnationality in the novel shortly.

critique of the status of women in Karachi. The unifying image of the novel is not Safina's consciousness or even that of the writer, but that of spatial organization defined by walls and fabric—walls that are constructed and demolished, and fabric that is flimsy, permeable, but also paradoxically impenetrable simultaneously. The narrative is consciously constructed as one that is by an outsider looking in—both the author (Naqvi) and the protagonist (Safina) are transnational women who view Karachi from a (nostalgic) distance created by their geographical re/locations and their class. Even though the novel never really “leaves” Karachi, readers are always aware of a narrative voice that is not “of Karachi” or one that does not quite “belong”.

The novel opens with Safina's return to her ancestral home to attend her grandmother's funeral, but she finds herself wanting to stay permanently in Karachi, hoping to recapture her childhood sense of “belonging” to one place. That desire is fanned by the news that she has inherited the ancestral home, and actually owns the house jointly with her cousin Kamran. She is urged by her mother to sell the house and to move back to America, but she finds that she wants to gain ownership of the space in its entirety, to actually “make it her own” both physically (by changing the space to reflect her memories of how it used to look) and legally. The novel ends with Safina's return to her life in Washington DC, stealing away from Karachi in the dead of night, accompanied by her mother Ameneh. During her stay in Karachi, Safina's search for roots leads her to concentrate all her energies on the structure of the house that she grew up in, hoping that, by returning the structure to its remembered glory, she will herself find her lost home, associated, in her mind, with a sense of security and belonging that is absent from her adult life. To gain that sense of belonging, Safina volunteers at a women's clinic run by a

young doctor; explores the city, taking pictures of people and places, hoping to capture the dynamic nature of the city; and tries to renovate her portion of the ancestral home. She finds, however, that her efforts to own, to belong to both the city and to her own childhood home, are wasted and that she has no recourse but to leave the city again and re-migrate to the States.

*Mass Transit* is a novel about locations and dislocations, uprooting and replanting, as well as about domestic and spatial organization. The following sections address the conceptualization of “home” as place and as imaginary to help ground my analysis of Safina’s interactions with her ancestral home. Before analyzing the construction of the feminine, zenana-like spaces in a home, I situate the entire discussion in Karachi’s architectural evolution during British rule and immediately following Independence from the British. Since the novel’s characters are inextricably linked to Karachi’s history—the novel contains a lengthy description of the city’s historical evolution at the beginning—it is important to explore the characterization of Karachi within the novel, along with the actual historical evolution of the city itself, in order to analyze the impact of the city’s characterization on the novel’s numerous protagonists.

### 4.3 Gendering a Metropolitan city

In her Prologue to the anthology *Gender Space Architecture*, Leslie Kanés Weisman asserts that “[t]he built environment is a cultural artifact” (1) and that “[b]oth the process through which we build and the forms themselves embody cultural values and imply standards of behaviour which affect us all” (1). According to Weisman, in traditional North American cityscapes dominated by skyscrapers, women have been confined to the suburban house, while men have been allocated the public space. She

asserts that “[w]omen are perceived as having very little to do with public space. In public buildings and spaces both physical and cultural barriers exclude women with children [for example]” (2). According to Weisman, “[t]he kinds of spaces we have, don’t have, or are denied access to can empower us or render us powerless. Spaces can enhance or restrict, nurture or impoverish. We must demand the right to architectural settings which will support the essential needs of all women” (4). What those essential needs are, however, is a matter for debate. For Weisman, those needs include access to spaces devoted to breastfeeding women, women with children in strollers, single parents with children, and women’s shelters (for women escaping specifically troubled housing situations) among others, which presumes that the gendering of a cityscape is intrinsically geared towards white middle-class women, or women who are not constrained by specific racial, economic, class or religious boundaries. I take Weisman’s assertions about the gendering logic behind cities as this chapter’s foundation in order to nuance her reading of the city as a troubled gendered space, one that is not only dominated by patriarchal constructions of gender roles, but also complicated by specific religious, racial, ethnic, and economic structures. In as much as Weisman’s assertions about the rigidly gendered organization of the city seem to be outdated in the current North American context—given the increasingly porous borders between domestic spheres and work-related spaces—it is important to note that the organization of space along the public (male) space/ private (female) space axis remains relevant, even urgent, in a Pakistani context. Specific religious and cultural norms continue to dictate the segregation and organization of both the city as well as domestic space along gender

lines, as well as enabling patriarchal controls over women's mobility and their access to specific public spaces in the city.

#### 4.3.1 *Karachi: The City and the Character*

Elizabeth Grosz and Alison Blunt have shown that there is a distinct connection between the architectural organization of a cityscape, and the social construction of specific gendered or sexed forms of being. Elizabeth Grosz asserts that

The city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality: the built environment provides the context and coordinates for contemporary forms of body. The city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies: it is the condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced. (104)

*Mass Transit* directly challenges this assumption of order in the city, suggesting, instead, that it is the disorder of the unplanned growth of a city like Karachi that enables segregation along political, economic and gender lines. The novel's prologue sets up an "us vs. them" duality specifically along socio-economic and class lines, a duality in which the city of Karachi is aligned with the poor, the slum-dwellers living in the city. The city is given literal voice, which then attacks the economic elite—of which Safina and Ameneh are a part—for being oblivious to the pain and suffering of the poor, the down-trodden people of Karachi. It proclaims:

Your structures and networks, your planning and permanence, your affluence and wastage make you alien to us in our homeland of unplanned labyrinths of temporary, meager existence. And it is here in these festering alleyways that we have evolved and metabolized within our *katchi abadis* [slums]. We have

converted these swamp-like existences of overflowing filth into waste stabilization ponds. We have risen and evolved in our illegal, unplanned structures against your illegitimate stranglehold on legitimacy. (Naqvi xiii)

Karachi (the character) seems to revel in squalor and the unhygienic conditions prevalent in the squatter-settlements surrounding the more affluent parts of the city, an ignorance of which is Safina's main weakness. However, the organic nature of the "native" city, as opposed to the highly structured and ordered portions of the colonial city, also enables new forms of corporeality, new ways of interacting with the built environment, ways that have been ignored in existing studies of spatiality and corporeality.<sup>106</sup> Speaking in a specifically North American context, Grosz writes, "[t]he city brings together economic flows, and power networks, forms of management and political organization, interpersonal, familial, and extra-familial social-relations, and the aesthetic/economic organization of space and place to create a semi-permanent but everchanging built environment or milieu" (105). What is one to do, however, with a city that grows exponentially in population, without any attention being paid to planning and development of services, infrastructure and housing needs? By giving the city a clear voice both in the prologue and the epilogue, Naqvi seems to be underlining the point that the city of Karachi is as much a defining character within the novel as any other protagonist. But where Grosz's analysis, as well as Safina's own impressions of the city—filtered as they are through her experiences in the offices of urban planning where

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<sup>106</sup> Feminist, gendered, readings of architecture theory in anthologies like Rendell's *Gender Space Architecture* have succeeded in inserting gender as a category of analysis to trouble and nuance architecture theory in reference to cityscapes. Race, culture and class, however, are yet to be adequately addressed.

she worked in Washington—rely heavily on the assumption of order in a metropolitan city, Naqvi’s novel revels in the disorder of the city’s unplanned development. Grosz’s assertion that it is the city’s organization itself that defines the operation of corporeal bodies within built space helps explain the disorder of the “largely plotless” novel itself. According to Grosz, “the form, structure, and norms of the city seep into and affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporeality. It affects the way the subject sees others” (108), and thus, if the city is itself segregated and (dis)organized along ethnic and gender lines, then the very operation of its inhabitants will become intrinsically disjointed, with each different “element” interacting with other constituents of the city in specific ways. The prologue of the novel begins with an image of the elite gathered to celebrate a wedding, the violence in the city being mentioned in hushed conversation, everyone being exhorted to “ignore the number of deaths reported in the newspapers every day” (Naqvi x),<sup>107</sup> for only the poor die, not the rich and powerful.

When asked about her inspiration for the novel by Laila Kazmi, during an interview for Jazbah.org, Maniza Naqvi asserted that “Karachi represented to me the essence of all that was right with Pakistan and all that could go wrong.” The political landscape is highlighted quite specifically with the mention of two significant dates at the beginning of the novel. The second chapter opens on 23 March 1988, with Rasheed Ali’s

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<sup>107</sup> The novel consistently gestures towards political strife, and violence that turned Karachi into a war-zone in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, but does not address the violence directly. In her essay “Karachi as Home” Priya Kumar shows that the political party representing the Muhajirs (immigrants from India who travelled to Pakistan during the Partition and settled in urban centers of Sindh) the MQM, “has been involved in various incidents of violence against members of other ethnic organizations, mainly Sindhis” (167). According to the political opposition to the MQM, the party is responsible for underhanded tactics like theft, blackmail, political assassinations and intimidation, all of which have made cities of Sindh particularly unsafe since the mid-1980’s (Verkaaik 56-57). This violence forms the backdrop to Naqvi’s novel, and is mentioned, but always silenced.



diatribe against the disintegrating political atmosphere of Karachi on the heels of displays of national solidarity in Islamabad, celebrating the forty-eighth year of the 1940 Pakistan Resolution. He demands: “Where is that Pakistani nationality that we created in forty-seven? Now we have Mohajirs, Sindhis, Balochis, Punjabis, Pathans, Seraikis, and God knows how many more if we went out and asked. Every one a Muslim but ready to kill each other for their old and new found tribes” (Naqvi 10-11). This statement becomes an important comment on the ethnic divisions and violence that characterized the late 1980’s and early 1990’s in Karachi.<sup>108</sup> The third chapter moves on to August 1988, the month of General Zia-ul-Haq’s plane crash, ending eleven years of dictatorship. General Zia’s plane crash was followed by general elections in November 1988, after which

the MQM [Mohajir Qaumi Mahaz] became the third-biggest political force in Pakistan and part of the ruling coalition in Pakistan’s capital of Islamabad. These political achievements occurred simultaneously with outbursts of ethnic violence in Karachi and Hyderabad in which young mohajirs<sup>109</sup> fought young Sindhis, Punjabis and Pathans. (Verkaaik 2)

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<sup>108</sup> For detailed analysis of ethnic violence in Karachi, see: Gayer, Laurent. “Guns, Slums, and ‘Yellow Devils’: A Genealogy of Urban Conflicts in Karachi, Pakistan” *Modern Asian Studies* 41. 3 (2007) 515–544.

<sup>109</sup> Muhajir literally means immigrant, but has religious significance in the Pakistani context. As scholars have noted, the term mohajir alludes to the migration of the first Muslims (initiated by Prophet Mohammad) from Mecca to Medina, “thus imbuing the (often forced) displacements [of Muslims from India] to Pakistan with a specifically religious significance and likening them to a pilgrimage. The appropriation of the term...[by] the state [allowed it] to constitute those who were already living within Pakistan as Ansars, the modern-day counterparts of the people of Medina who had offered hospitality to the followers of the Prophet, making the task of welcoming the new arrivals a quasi-religious duty” (Kumar 163). The use of the terms shifts in the late-1970’s, and Muhajir now designates a political, ethnic identity that means “you do not belong” in Pakistan, “you are not from here” (Verkaaik 13).

The novel does not mention any further dates. Presumably, Safina's stay in Karachi includes the election campaigns, but not the actual elections themselves, as Safina leaves soon after attending an MQM political rally.

The novel characterizes the city as a stage on which a political drama unfolds, with an ever-changing cast of characters, props and stagehands. In his letters to his cousin Safina, Kamran claims that

The varying talents and capability of the overall cast make it difficult to decide whether the performance is dynamic, deserving of a standing ovation, or one that will bring the curtain down so that it will never rise again. The final act remains free-wheeling, its conclusion nowhere in sight, and the spectator, yours truly [Kamran], remains absorbed looking out at the vast theatre from his windows.

(Naqvi 6)

This characterization of Karachi as a theatre with protagonists like Safina and Kamran distanced from the actual political action is significant both for its position within the novel (the passage is relatively close to the beginning) and for the role it performs. By characterizing the city as a theatrical production put on for the benefit of its (wealthy) audience, the novel effectively divorces the social context from the lives of the characters themselves, albeit with an ironic, almost wry tone. It also hints at the class-economic divisions in the city: the ones truly invested in the drama are those struggling for daily survival, the poor, the downtrodden, the disenfranchised masses, while the elite—like Safina and Kamran—have the luxury to watch and observe from the distance born of privilege and economic well-being. Such a characterization hints at the author's own location at the time of the novel's publication—Naqvi wrote and published the novel

while living in Washington, and seems to have found it relatively easy to distance the narrative voice from the main characters. For the main part, the narrative voice seems to identify itself with Safina, but passages like the intrusion of the old man with his *thaila* [cart used as a portable shop] suggest a voice distinct from Safina's consciousness. The incident involves the intrusion of an old, impoverished man into the narrative, while the narrator tries to describe the spatial organization of the house. The old man carrying his *thaila* demands space from the narrator in the novel, asking for at least a page of description, but the narrator asks him to wait his turn. Interestingly, the dialogue takes up a full page (Naqvi 37-38), at the exact point in the narrative where the narrator has begun to move from a description of the house and Karachi's political upheavals to a description of the house's surroundings and its location. This particular incident allows the narrator to cloak the specificities of urban location while maintaining the pretense of historical realism, and also enables a particular critique of class, and economic and social privilege – a critical stance curiously absent in Safina herself.

The intrusion of Gul Khan Baba (the owner of the cart) in the narrative is preceded by a lengthy diversion devoted to the description of the house and its compound, which then begins to move into a description of the political troubles and administrative difficulties prevalent in Karachi in the late 1980's. The incident becomes a major comment on the deliberate amnesia of the economic elite of Karachi, who, according to Gul Khan Baba, like "the Municipality itself shov[e] me away, ignore[e] me" (Naqvi 37). The complexity of the novel's myriad foci becomes apparent here: the novel begins and ends with travel, but includes multiple voices and themes, all of which are grounded in, and inextricably linked with, the historical and political evolution of the

city of Karachi. The passage also highlights the spatial and social boundaries that segregate Karachiites along both socio-economic and gender lines, while simultaneously demonstrating the porous nature of those very borders. As much as the political and economic elite would like to maintain isolation from (and ignorance of) the violence that affected the lives of the slum-dwellers and the working-class, they cannot remain enclosed in the shelter constructed of economic well-being. The political reality of the city continuously intrudes and asserts itself on the consciousness of the elite.

As the novel shows, Karachi's economic and demographic development is directly related to the British Colonial enterprise of the nineteenth century. Both Yasmin Cheema and Yasmeen Lari, in their separate projects, explore the historical evolution of Karachi as a city, and the impact of that history on the cityscape. The thrust of both projects is towards the salvation, restoration and preservation of historical (colonial) buildings, currently in a significant state of disrepair in Karachi. As they explore the architectural history of Karachi, these writers focus almost exclusively on the commercial buildings built by the British during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Very little (or no) work has been done on the spatial organization of the historical "native" portions of the city.

According to Cheema, Karachi was first established as a port by "Hindu merchants of Karak Bunder...but its development, as a major western port of India is attributed to the Talpurs, who conquered it in 1729" (1). The British arrived at the port in the early part of the nineteenth century, and signed a trade treaty with the amirs [rulers] of Sind in 1832 (Lari 30). Sir Charles Napier began the conquest of Sind in 1842, resulting in the annexation of Sind to the British by 1844, with Karachi being declared

the capital (Lari 52). By 1850, the first two British Governors of Sind, Sir Charles Napier and Sir Bartle Frere, had developed the city by constructing bungalows, offices, clubs, army barracks, roads, canals and a railway system to connect the city to other interior cities of Sindh as well as the rest of British India (Cheema 2).

The socio-spatial dynamics of the city changed significantly with the British conquest. Both Lari and Cheema show that the British divided the city into two portions—Lari, in fact, calls Karachi the Dual City—one section demarcated for the use of the British, and one for the “natives” of Karachi. The “white town” or the British city was characterized by wide roads, grid-like arrangements and spacious homes and clubs. The “black town” or “native quarters” evolved organically, with narrow winding roads, few open spaces for socializing, and closely placed buildings serving multiple functions (Cheema 4-6). According to Lari, the native city did not separate function from space, and work and domestic spaces were intrinsically intertwined. The British conquerors, on the other hand, brought with them clear notions of separation of private from public, with clearly marked areas for work related activities and separately designated domestic spaces (houses, bungalows) (Lari 62-65). With sharp distinctions between the black and white parts of town, the city was used mainly for its location as a port connecting major ports of the British Empire, with little invested in its infrastructure or housing plans (Lari 136).

By 1947, at independence from the British, according to Cheema, the city had “a population of approximately 450,000. Slightly over 50 percent of the population were Sindhi speaking” (7), 51 percent were Hindus and 45 percent Muslims (Cheema 7-8). Post-Independence, Karachi received “600,000 refugees from India, a large number of

government servants and supporting staff...from other provinces” (Cheema 8) as it had been declared the capital of the new country. The Hindu population left for India, and between the years 1951 and 1961 the population of Karachi increased from 1.137 million to 2.044 million. The mother tongue of 50% of the population became Urdu instead of Sindhi, and the Sindhi-speaking population was reduced to 5.6% of the population (Cheema 8). Demographically, the city changed from a Hindu-dominated city to one that is predominantly Muslim, all of which speaks to the complex exchange of not only populations, but also possessions and property, an indication of which appears within the novel, during the description of Safina’s family’s migration and re-settlement in Pakistan.

Sarah Ansari has discussed the pressures on the city’s administration and the housing crisis created by this rapid change in the city’s population and demography in her book *Life After Partition*, in which she analyzes the city’s spatial organization around ethnic and class lines, with each new influx of immigrants congregating around specific commonalities like language, region and even race. Since Karachi was declared the capital of the new state of Pakistan, most of the civil servants and bureaucrats chose to migrate to Karachi (Alavi 166), but the state itself was little prepared for the large influx of refugees. The largely Urdu-speaking Muslim population from India, that arrived in Sindh in 1947, failed to assimilate with the existing Sindhi population, and maintained an identity that linked the mohajir (immigrant) community to the Urdu-speaking Muslims in India, rather than align them linguistically or culturally to the Sindhi population. Lack of proper housing and other resources further exacerbated the division of the two communities—the mohajirs and the Sindhi residents of Karachi—along class and linguistic lines. Cooperative housing schemes of the late 1940’s and early 1950’s led to

improvements in housing and accommodation, but divided Karachi along communal lines, with each group of Muslims, representing different areas of India, establishing mini-communities within the larger city (Ansari *Life* 140-141). The historical and architectural evolution of the city, thus, has been largely unplanned, completely disordered, resulting in an administrative nightmare of a city, a disorder that is foregrounded in the prologue of *Mass Transit*.

It is in this historical and demographical milieu that Safina finds herself. Armed with her cousin Kamran's romanticized visions of the city, Safina views its dwellers through her camera's lens, trying to capture the dynamic nature of the cityscape, with its teeming masses. Once she realizes that the photographs are not enough, she approaches a young doctor, Dr. Taufeeq, running a small clinic in a slum, telling him that she wants to get a better sense of the slum's living conditions, so that she can write better reports as a Development Worker in Washington. She tells Dr. Taufeeq that she "always make[s] provision for extension workers in all [her] projects but [she has] never really worked as an extension worker [her]self" (145) and asks to spend time with the women attending the clinic "explaining to them about basic hygiene, nutrition, cleanliness, and all of that" (145). Dr. Taufeeq gives her permission, and she finds herself spending an entire day, stumbling through basics of hygiene in cooking, bathing and child-care. On her way home from the clinic, ensconced in her air-conditioned car, she dwells on the city's desperate need for a mass transit system, deciding that the mass transit system would help connect everyone. Since "her only view of Karachi's social life" (147) is restricted to this view of the ceaseless traffic on Karachi's roads, her solution to the compartmentalized and isolated lives of the city-dwellers is based on her experiences in the States, and on the

mass transit systems that dominate large North American cities. Even her attempt to help at the clinic is coloured by her impressions of how people should be living their lives, with no real understanding of how their lives are actually organized. She is told by Dr. Taufeeq that

[t]hey [the women in the clinic] do not hear you. You've been too immersed in some pictorial in your mind to notice that your image is not what they approve of. Have you seen any younger women here? No! Because I am the doctor and it is inappropriate for anyone except the very youngest children and the older married women to come here... You don't understand, you are an outsider, they have nothing in common with you. (161)

This crucial conversation, followed as it is by the episode of Shaheen's exploding stove, becomes the catalyst for Safina's realization that she cannot make a space for herself<sup>110</sup> in either the city or her own house. Taufeeq's comments also hint at the religiously-shaded socio-spatial dynamics that divide the cityscape. Even though he runs a free clinic for both men and women in the very slum in which they dwell, young, unmarried women do not attend his clinic because exposing their bodies to him would mean breaking the rules of segregation and purdah. The women who do attend his clinic do so covered by burqas and veils, describing their ailments to him but not permitting him to examine them physically. Even as a doctor he may not touch them, for that would mean touching the body of a woman not related to him. It is this intricacy of the veiling and segregation

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<sup>110</sup> Safina's sense of belonging at home, her inability to make a space for herself in the tenement-mansion is complicated by the fact that she cannot accommodate or account for the space that the lower-class women must take-up in the same mansion.



system that Safina fails to understand, rules that have a significant impact on the city's spatial organization, to which I now turn.

In as much as the architectural evolution of Karachi can be attributed to the advent of the British, the social dynamics of the current city post-partition are organized by Islamic rules of spatial segregation along gendered lines. The novel mentions, albeit briefly, the separate sections of public buses for men and women, and hints at gendered segregation during the descriptions of Safina's visits to Dr. Taufeeq's clinic. The novel also includes a critique of the deliberate cold-heartedness of the elite, specifically of the socio-economic elite who have the means and the luxury to transcend and to cross geographical and class borders. Both the prologue and the epilogue of the novel make it a point to highlight the political amnesia of the economic elite of Karachi, and to revel in the disordered growth of an unplanned city. Safina's attempts at re-ordering her house's space and at changing women's attitudes during her forays into Dr. Taufeeq's clinic are ineffectual, and she remains an outsider, someone who cannot, should not, attempt to change the status quo. This particular characterization of the city, then, becomes problematic when attempting to analyze women's interactions with both public and private space. Women obviously have access to public spaces, and are even ostensibly free within their own homes. However, the inside-outside dichotomy is complicated, even challenged within the novel, to show that restrictions on women's mobility in Karachi stem from a complex web of internalized religious injunctions ("chador aur chardewari"), socio-economic status and spatial organization, and cannot be as easily solved as the problems Safina addresses in her own home.

#### 4.4 The Fractured Home

As Safina concentrates her energies on restoring her ancestral house to its remembered glory, other characters within the novel exhort her to give up her efforts, to return to her life of (perceived) luxury in the United States, because the disorder of the city, and the decrepit, crumbling house cannot be whipped into shape. The almost claustrophobic focus on the architecture of the house—with descriptions of the house, its condition, its occupants and their relations to each other dominating the narrative at the cost of the political upheavals in Karachi of the late 1980's—helps question and analyze the notion of “home”, homeland and gendered space in the city, questions that are further complicated by the novel's focus on particular architectural features, specific types of spaces created with the help of short walls and fabric, and the use of those spaces by those who inhabit them. The mansion is viewed, valorized, as a “home” by Safina and Sophie,<sup>111</sup> but Kamran,<sup>112</sup> Ameneh,<sup>113</sup> and Hajra<sup>114</sup> all view it as a house which is almost an inescapable trap.

In their book *Home*, Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling show that a complex set of emotions is associated with the dwelling we call “home”. According to their definition,

Home... is a *place*, a site in which we live. But, more than this, home is also an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings. These may be feelings of

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<sup>111</sup> Safina's Aunt, her mother's (Ameneh's) sister.

<sup>112</sup> Sophie's son, Safina's cousin.

<sup>113</sup> Safina's mother

<sup>114</sup> One of the women living in a separate portion of the house. She owns her portion of the property, and is married to her cousin, who is abusive and an alcoholic.

belonging, desire and intimacy... but can also be feelings of fear, violence and alienation. These feelings, ideas and imaginaries are intrinsically spatial. Home is thus a *spatial imaginary*: a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places. (2; original italics)

Safina's sense of home is imbued with a complex set of imaginaries, nostalgic rememberings of a dwelling filled with a sense of rootedness, of belonging, of feeling "at home" in a specific place, a specific site. Even though her house itself is located in a place, a city, that has a history of violence that would inspire fear, she herself is insulated from that violence within the four walls of her house-home. Since her remembered feelings of belonging are intrinsically linked to the house's spatiality, she finds herself unable to feel "at home" again until she restores the various spaces of the house to their "original" glory, or to her memories of their past luster.

Her memories of home are also mediated through her newly acquired, but left unacknowledged (by her through the course of the novel), sensibilities as a diasporic immigrant returning to her "real" or "originary" home, which, in turn, invest her interactions with her house with particular feelings of longing, and the ultimate realization of an un-belonging. Even though the novel does not directly address Safina's ethnicity (we only know that she is Shia because she returns to Karachi to participate in an annual Shia ritual), the account of her family's migration from India to Pakistan sets her up as a Mohajir in Karachi, an identity that is particularly fraught and fractured. In the context of the late 1980's in Karachi, the Mohajir identity became a political, and particularly fractured, identity as Verkaik, Gayer, Ansari (among others) have shown.

Priya Kumar argues in her essay “Karachi as Home” that the Mohajirs of Karachi, “[r]ecognizing the impossibility of a return to India... have invented themselves as a diaspora in search of a homeland” (169), a search that manifests itself in Safina’s multiple migrations, and her consistent attempts to recapture a sense of “belonging” of “feeling at home” in her tenement-mansion. What she does not realize, and what she does not acknowledge, is that even if she decides to stay in Karachi, because of her family’s migration, and her own migration away from her “origins”, she can no longer “return” home. She will always-already be displaced. Naqvi’s novel highlights this sense of estrangement from the “homeland” and suggests that there can be no “going home”. Instead, there can only be leave-takings and travels away from the imagined “home”—the place of belonging cannot be re-placed.

Safina is portrayed as a diasporic privileged immigrant; she spends most of her adult life in Washington DC as a development planner, only to realize that her “true home” is back in Pakistan. Her attempts to recapture her lost sense of belonging are manifested in her efforts to return her portion of the ancestral home to its original luster and glory. She spends hours on her knees, scrubbing and cleaning the floors of her portion of the house, “sweat pouring down her face, her arms and back aching from the scrubbing, her head dizzy from the sometimes circular, sometimes back and forth motions” (Naqvi 106) in an attempt to re-familiarize herself with the space she had left behind, one that was “never... cherished till it was too far in the past to return to, each place arrived at was only a vantage point from which to look back with longing” (Naqvi 30). Safina has an inkling, near the beginning of the novel, that her memories of her house, her emotional “baggage”, may not necessarily be “real”. As the novel recounts the

family's trajectory from India to Pakistan and to the house, Safina begins to wonder if she truly belongs to this particular house, the way she had always assumed. As she

sat in the midst of this graveyard of memories, she realized that it had been safe to sit in Washington DC and build intricate structures of vivid recollections. A fear slowly grew inside her that perhaps it was all just gossamer fabrications of her imagination which she had inadvertently inherited from her mother's stories. And she, Safina, simply perpetuated the chaos, building inside her mind with the bricks and mortar of her mother's remembrances a place where she longed to be, where she did not belong, where she sought acceptance and would constantly be rejected. (30-31)

It is this insight, that she may never really belong, that leads her to begin her restorative project, to clean the mosaic floor of the *gole kamra* [the round room] so that she can recapture her sense of belonging. When urged by her mother, Ameneh, to sell the house and return to her life in the States, Safina refuses to sell it, asserting, somewhat stubbornly, that she loves the house. Ameneh responds angrily: "You love this house. You don't know what you're talking about. It means things to you which are not real. It is full of unhappiness and loneliness!" (Naqvi 70). Where Safina keeps trying to fit in, in order to belong, denying her misgivings about her un-belonging, her mother characterizes her home, the house, as a trap filled with bad memories. In her book, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-century Fiction*, Rosemary Marangoly George analyzes this particular longing for a home, and establishes a distinct genre for fictions that take this nostalgia as the central theme, and calls it the Immigrant Genre (171). George shows that immigrant writing "is marked by a curiously detached reading

of the experience of ‘homelessness’ which is compensated for by an excessive use of the metaphor of luggage, both spiritual and material” (171). Safina’s conundrum lies in her inability to recognize herself as the immigrant who can never really get rid of her luggage—her altered world-view, her longing for something lost, never to be re-gained, in spite of all her efforts to recover her sense of “rootedness”, of belonging. Even though the novel never really leaves Pakistan, and seems to be intrinsically invested in the national schemes, a disregard for which characterizes the immigrant genre according to George, *Mass Transit* remains a novel about locations and dislocations, uprootings, and replantings, mediated as those re-plantings are through Safina’s nostalgia and Ameneh’s memories of a troubled relationship with the house (which reminds her of her husband’s death).<sup>115</sup> Sinead McDermott has drawn a distinction between nostalgia and memory in her article “The Gender of Nostalgia: Memory, Nostalgia and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*” and shows that nostalgia—the (painful) longing to return home—can be recuperated as a powerful feminist discursive strategy, in the form of “critical or reflective nostalgia” which uses the “past to unsettle the present” (McDermott 403). Naqvi, through Safina’s nostalgic accounts of what the house used to be, and her attempts to restore it to its original luster, then, attempts to use the re-membered past to restructure, and in the process re-build, the present, which, for Safina consists of the painful realization that the house, and with it her past, are disintegrating.

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<sup>115</sup> Ameneh’s husband, Safina’s father Haroon, is mentioned by Ameneh as a painful memory of political violence. Haroon was murdered during political insurgencies in Karachi, and his dead body was brought back to the house. The house’s walls become reminders of painful memories of a happy marriage and a tragic widowhood for Ameneh.

The internal architectural divisions of the house itself, with its facade of unity, are replicated by the inhabitants of the house, and the structure of the walls and the divisions define their interactions. Each portion of the house is decorated and maintained to reflect the personalities of the inhabitants, with each family maintaining an identity separate from the other residents, an identity that is expressed through their use of, and interactions with, the actual structure itself, which, in turn, reflect the differences in class and socio-economic status of the four families in the house. The mansion-like house is divided into four distinct sections. One half of the property is used by Safina's family, with the downstairs portion used by Safina's mother and grandmother, and the upstairs given over to Kamran's family, including Safina's Aunt Sophie. Safina's family is portrayed as belonging to the upwardly mobile, upper-middle-class of Karachi, the elite of the city. The second half belongs to two different families, both of whom are considered to be lower-middle-class families. The upstairs portion of that half of the house is occupied by Hajra and her family, while the downstairs section is given over to a warehouse, overseen by an old Maulana<sup>116</sup> and his young wife. Ignored initially within the narrative, the fourth occupant of the house, the Maulana, continues to intrude on Safina's nostalgic re-visit, until his actions have a direct impact on Safina's decision to ultimately leave Karachi—an episode that will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. The novel devotes a significant amount of time to explaining the intricacies of the

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<sup>116</sup> This appellation is used for any older man sporting a beard. Literally used for religious scholars, but not all men who are called maulana are religious scholars.

relationships among the various occupants/owners of the house,<sup>117</sup> which, in turn, highlights the significance of the linkages between the different families and the architectural organization of the tenement-type mansion/house itself.

Each occupant of the house maintains his/her portion differently. Aunt Sophie, for example, takes immense pains with her part of the house, decorating the stairs with expensive potted plants. The stairwell leading up to Sophie's section is "in the appearance of the outer house, the singular feature of renewal and upkeep. Its shiny white, mosaic stairs and wrought-iron balustrade were inconsistent in their hint of healthiness in an otherwise rundown, morose environment" (Naqvi 51). The portion rented out to the Maulana, on the other hand, is covered completely, the courtyard or *sehan* masked by an ugly burlap canopy used to hide the Maulana's young wife from the prying eyes of the neighbours. Safina's portion has deteriorated significantly, just like the portion used by the "opperwalas" or the renters.

Abandoned by a Hindu family at the time of Partition, the house was allocated to Safina's grandfather, Zafar Ali, an immigrant from India. The house had originally been called "*Shanti Anand*" (peaceful home) and

was one of the many homes that hastily departing Hindu merchants had abandoned at the time of partition and which had been used to house the arriving Muslims...Safina's grandfather Zafar Ali, had been one of the fortunate few who had been allotted a place in a sprawling house...the sprawling haveli was actually

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<sup>117</sup> The novel lists a number of inter-family marriages: Safina's Aunt Sophie, for example, marries her cousin, and simply moves into the apartment above the portion owned by Safina's grandmother. Similarly, Hajra, one of the "opperwalas" marries her cousin, due to which she does not have to move out of her own home.



a tenement, divided and shared between two separate and unrelated families, and...inside those whitewashed walls poverty threatened and a sense of hopelessness prevailed. (Naqvi 38)

As the novel devotes significant space to the description of the various features of the house itself, the following sections of the chapter will delve into the architectural features used to divide and organize the domestic space of the tenement type mansion. I will begin with an examination of the short wall dividing the courtyard into two sections, with one section belonging to Safina, and the other to the maulana and his wife Shaheen, which I will link to the fabric canopy covering the maulana's half of the courtyard. I will then discuss the importance of the space-defining chandnis—white fabric used to demarcate space during large gatherings like weddings and funerals, all of which will speak to the gendered divisions of space with the help of specific tools—short walls, fabric. Even when a domestic space is not specifically gendered like a zenana, women's movements through different spaces are intrinsically gendered, and also confined and restricted.

#### 4.5 Architectural Divisions, Gendered Segregation and the Islamic Segregation System

As Safina focuses her energies on changing the structure around her, she is exhorted to ignore the reality of her larger location (Karachi). Her Aunt tells her quite specifically to pay close attention to the house itself, and urges her to

[l]ook around this house, Safina, this is your country, what more can anyone need. Don't worry about what's beyond its walls, the barricades, the sounds of explosions in crowded bazaars...Just don't get involved with it! Live within these

walls, this is your belonging that you are searching for, your history. Preserve it.

And don't let the speculators steal it away from you. (Naqvi 122)

Thus, the inside-outside dichotomy hinted at through the use of the chandnis [white sheets] is used here to establish specific boundaries between the outside—the squalor of the city—and the inside of the house. The novel uses the image of the white sheets spread on the ground as tools that insulate revelers from the violence dominating the cityscape in the late 1980's in Karachi. I will discuss this image in detail shortly. Here, her Aunt's exhortation helps Safina justify her distance from the lower-class women sharing the tenement-mansion with her, helping her, instead, to live in a sheltered bubble in which the rest of the city and its activities hardly ever intrude.

This particular exhortation comes at the end of a lengthy reflection on the nature of the wall separating Safina's portion of the compound from that of the Maulana, the caretaker of the neighboring godown (warehouse), who has just recently put up an ugly burlap canopy to shield his portion of the compound. The wall dividing the space is particularly decrepit, mould breaking through in various spots hurriedly plastered over. The ugliness of the wall is augmented by the ugliness of the burlap canopy visible above it, disturbing Safina's aesthetic sensibilities. Interestingly, the upper-class women, Safina and her aunt, find it far too easy to ignore the reasons behind the presence of the canopy. The canopy has been put up by the Maulana at the behest of Hajra, one of the women living in the portion above the Maulana's warehouse. Hajra had noticed her husband flirting with the Maulana's young wife, and in order to protect her own family she asks the Maulana to keep his wife in check, telling him that "I live upstairs...and you are not the first tenant we have had. We have many boys upstairs, your wife is very young. You

understand...” (Naqvi102). It is this broad hint dropped by Hajra that prompts the Maulana to imprison his wife completely, boarding up the windows, locking her in every day. The dividing wall thus divides free (upper-class) women (Safina and her family) from an imprisoned woman, one who could have been rescued by them, but never is. The burlap canopy is viewed by both Safina and her mother merely as an inconvenience, and is left unquestioned, merely tolerated as a whimsical fancy of an eccentric old man, until Shaheen’s gas stove explodes, and the young imprisoned girl is burnt to death because she has no avenue of escape.

Significantly, Shaheen’s story is silenced<sup>118</sup> completely within the novel, while all other women’s stories (including Hajra’s story of abuse and neglect)<sup>119</sup> are told and re-told throughout. The novel suggests that only the upwardly mobile, diasporic Safina could have saved her from her fate, but was too busy, or selfish, to do so. The dying Shaheen looks directly at Safina, and asks “...why didn’t you come to find out about me when the windows disappeared? I thought to myself, surely she will come to ask about me. She drives everywhere. She will find this horrible...You know so much, didn’t you wonder what happened to me?” (Naqvi 165). This question becomes the catalyst for Safina’s realization of her status as a transnational, privileged feminist, a transnationalism that comes with certain responsibilities towards women who need her help. This

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<sup>118</sup> This silencing is a gesture to Spivak’s characterization of the gendered subaltern, who is silenced completely, in spite of her attempts at recording her story in various, non-traditional ways. Shaheen’s death, the silence surrounding her imprisonment, can be read as the subaltern’s silent history, acknowledged only through gaps in the text.

<sup>119</sup> Hajra marries her cousin, as mentioned already, so that she may retain ownership of her portion of the house. Her husband gets drunk periodically, brings in little income and abuses Hajra regularly. Hajra screams back, but after he hits their son, she attempts to leave the relationship, only to be brought back by the family.

realization also situates her in the position of a “native informant” (S. Khan *Zina* 118) who could have rescued the native “victim” of patriarchal violence. Both Shaheen and Safina are, however, complex figures, for neither can be easily categorized as patriarchy’s victim and rescuer. Shaheen is not just a victim of a static, unchanging Islamic culture, but a victim of both: patriarchal constructions of a dangerous feminine sexuality that must be controlled and guarded, and women’s complicity in the maintenance of that gendered codification of feminine sexuality (the canopy goes up at Hajra’s behest). Safina, on the other hand, is a privileged transnational feminist, but one who is unaware of her power and agency until it is too late to use it. Shaheen asks her why she never questioned the boarding up of the windows, and Safina has nothing to offer in her own defense. The novel’s suggestion that Safina is somehow free (Shaheen points out that Safina is free to go wherever she wants) while Shaheen is not, is complicated within the novel by Safina’s realization that she, too, is trapped. As she contemplates Shaheen’s death, she realizes that she “had nowhere to escape to, she would not be able to get away...” (Naqvi 168). Safina can be considered transnational in her ability to traverse international borders—she travels between the United States and Pakistan, and works in the offices of development planning in Washington, which indicates that she is educated, and privileged. But her sense of privilege is not accompanied by a feminist consciousness, or a desire to “rescue” those less fortunate, a desire that marks transnational feminist discourse, as Amina Jamal shows in her essay “Transnational Feminism as Critical Practice”. Jamal reads transnational feminist practices of feminists in Pakistan as their “appropriation of universalist and essentialized notions of woman and citizen as a counterhegemonic move aimed at shaping

public/political space in Pakistan in such a way that new subject positions could be located from which to challenge patriarchal nationalism” (77). Safina’s position as a privileged immigrant to the West returning to her ‘native’ East could have the potential to speak to the politics of transnational feminism. What the novel does, however, is challenge the deliberate political blindness of the privileged elite. As Safina herself admits, she was too busy to see “the misery there [under the canopy], she never wanted to. It disrupted the cleanliness of neat patterns, her arrangement for how life itself should be laid out” (167).

*Mass Transit*’s focus on the (im)mobility of its characters is a direct comment on the current trend to valorize transnationality and the ability to move across borders, or even to dwell in-between borders. Safina’s reactions to her home are coloured by her experiences as a privileged, economic immigrant to the US, while Hajra, Kamran and even Safina’s mother are characterized as immobile, fixed to the house, presumed to be unchanging and permanent “fixtures” of Safina’s re-membered home. It is important to note that it is the veiling and segregation system itself that regulates the division of the house in specific ways as well as one that determines the (im)mobility of the occupants of the house. Safina is the only woman who seems to be able to transcend the borders between different spaces with relative ease. The women occupying the upstairs portion rely on Safina and her mother for news of the various events in the city, as they are confined to the domestic sphere due to both economic and social reasons. They do not own a car, nor can they afford one, and are without the chaperonage of appropriate men, which would allow them to leave the domestic sphere and go out in public safely. In spite

of her ability to travel from space to space, and across borders, Safina remains trapped as well, albeit in a different way.

The interplay between the burlap canopy put up by the Maulana and the wall dividing the two courtyards is significant. Both the canopy and the wall act as agents of concealment, but reveal more than they conceal. The canopy is designed to conceal the charms of the Maulana's young wife, Shaheen, from the (presumably predatory) eyes of the "many young boys" living upstairs, while the wall itself is designed to cordon off a section of the courtyard, in order to conceal the warehouse on its other side from visitors' gazes. Both the wall and the canopy are supposed to hide away something beautiful and precious from the world's gaze, but the ugliness of each draws attention to itself, and thus, by extension, to the very thing it is designed to conceal. This play on concealing and revealing is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's contemplations on curtains and veils in her essay, "Belief Itself" in which she discusses Freud's "Fort/Da" episode.<sup>120</sup> Irigaray focuses on the curtains surrounding the bed, instead of on the child's game, reading the cot as a womb-like space, surrounded by flimsy curtains, which she imagines to be "white or very light in color and probably opaque. It's hard to imagine it all black, absorbing the light, or a bright glaring red or indeed any color that would separate or confuse the two sides, the edges" ("Belief" 30), which leads her to suggest that the curtains surrounding the bed allow Ernst to project his mastery over his mother's absence

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<sup>120</sup> Irigaray focuses on Derrida's reading of the episode, describing two-year-old Ernst's game with a spool attached to a thread, in detail. Ernst throws the spool into his cot, and calls out "gone," then pulls the thread so the spool "magically" reappears, a game that is interpreted by Freud as his means of gaining control over his mother's unexplained absence. Since the spool and thread are interpreted by both Derrida and Freud as Ernst's way of reconciling himself to his mother's absence, the spool itself becomes a point of connection between the mother and son, with the cot standing in for the mother's body.

on to the curtain-veil (the screen). With its focus on absence-presence, revealing-concealing,<sup>121</sup> Irigaray's reading of the curtains surrounding the bed helps link my earlier discussion of the wall/*teikhion*<sup>122</sup>/courtyard wall to the burlap canopy. Both the canopy and the wall divide space, restrict the visual field, and attempt to hide femininity as well as (ostensibly) provide privacy to the occupants of the space. Both the wall and the canopy also allow Safina to construct and project her own sense of control over her environment—by focusing on the ugliness of the wall and the canopy, Safina can ignore the presence (Shaheen), the materiality of the oppressiveness of the enclosure created by the fabric and the wall. Both dividing mechanisms are also unpleasant features of the compound, tacked on for a specific function, without any thought spared for their aesthetic appeal. Both the wall and the canopy are flimsy in their very nature, in that the wall is short and could be scaled easily, while the burlap is a fabric division, one that could be pierced easily. However, they are both figured to be impermeable, concealing the objects being hidden, creating new, liminal spaces that are intrinsically feminine, transitory and yet insulated completely from the “outside” (male) world, created by men (specially in Shaheen's case) to control the femininity contained within. The *chandnis* spread on floors for special occasions insulate (and by extension, contain) the occupants in a similar manner, highlighting the complex interplay between class, privilege, religion

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<sup>121</sup> Irigaray suggests that the curtains surrounding the cot act more as connecting agents than dividing ones, creating an interstitial, in-between space that is intrinsically feminine. According to Irigaray, the function of the curtain-veil is to divide and conceal the womb-cot from the child, but also act as the agent that helps him assume mastery over the womb, his space, his mother's absence.

<sup>122</sup> Recall my discussion of Irigaray's conceptualization of the wall-ette during my discussion of *Blasphemy's* characterization of the *zenana*.

and gender foregrounded in the novel. Where the canopy hides female sexuality, the chandnis “protect” revelers from the violence of the city, an image to which I now turn.

The fabric ceiling, or the canopy is prefigured within the novel by the recurrent images of the white sheets (chandnis) spread out on floors during weddings, or funerals. The chandnis are a feature of every large gathering in Pakistan, and are used instead of carpets to demarcate a space for guests to assemble in large circular groups. Since the novel begins with the images of these white sheets or chandnis, it is important to briefly explore the connection between architectural details like the wall-ette dividing the courtyard and the use of fabric to define and confine space.

Within the novel, the chandnis are mentioned a number of times, seeming to hold a charm all their own in their pristine whiteness, holding darkness at bay, called “circles of light” acting as insulation “from the sounds outside. Like those sounds that night when the ambulance sirens wailed and tore the night air as bodies lay bleeding and ruptured in a hideous explosion” (Naqvi viii). A similar function is performed by the courtyard wall when it allows Safina to focus almost exclusively on her own part of the garden, finding the canopy easy to ignore, thus becoming insulated from the world beyond her own sphere. The canopy, on the other hand, is quite literally designed to insulate and to protect. Interestingly, both the canopy and the chandnis succeed in their space-defining roles, so much so that no one manages to transgress either border, while the wall dividing the courtyard is scaled in an unsuccessful attempt to save Shaheen from the burning stove.

In her descriptions of the chandnis, Naqvi focuses on the changing meaning of the fabric, on the fabric’s strange ability to



become enchanted, illuminated circles of light covering the earth, transforming it into a luxurious *dewan*.<sup>123</sup> White sheets that insulate them all, insulate all of us, from the sounds outside... White sheets covering carpets for *milads*.<sup>124</sup> White sheets for *dholkis*<sup>125</sup> at weddings. Night after night. White sheets spread out for *madjlises*,<sup>126</sup> white sheets for *mujras*<sup>127</sup> and *ghazals*<sup>128</sup> and *qawwali*<sup>129</sup> nights merging into *fajr's*<sup>130</sup> dawn. (Naqvi viii-ix)

The white sheets somehow hold the encroaching darkness at bay, the very nature of their whiteness, their implied purity<sup>131</sup> defining notions of interior and exterior, entry and exit. The unidentified voice at the beginning of the prologue tells the reader that “I stand at the edge of white sheets looking in, poised at their fringe” (Naqvi viii). The transformative power of the white sheets on the floor is contemplated again as the jet-lagged Safina struggles to come to terms with her grandmother’s death, sitting on a white sheet,

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<sup>123</sup> Long cushioned seat

<sup>124</sup> Gathering, most often of women, to honour the Prophet Muhammad. Poems written in praise of the prophet (naat) are read by a specialized Naat-Khwan or Naat reader.

<sup>125</sup> Song and dance party organized before a Pakistani wedding to celebrate the upcoming nuptials.

<sup>126</sup> Arabic word used to refer to religious, educational or political gatherings; it also refers to gatherings held during Moharram by Shiite Muslims to mourn the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammad’s grandsons.

<sup>127</sup> A gathering of men, assembled specifically to “enjoy” dances performed by specialized courtesans

<sup>128</sup> Urdu poems with strict rhyme schemes, performed at specialized gatherings called ghazal nights, or mushairas.

<sup>129</sup> Musical form popularized in India by Sufi saints.

<sup>130</sup> Dawn, or first light, time for first prayer of the day.

<sup>131</sup> This whiteness, purity, ephemerality of the sheets is also reminiscent of Irigaray’s contemplations on the curtains surrounding Ernst’s cot in the Fort/Da episode. In both manifestations of the white fabric, it is the impenetrable ephemerality that is of interest for my analysis.

counting out prayer seeds for the departed soul. The chandnis show up twice after that—once as sheets spread over Persian carpets during a wedding celebration and then again after Shaheen’s death. Safina wonders why the sheets are called chandnis, or moonlight: “White like moonlight, spreading whiteness, washing away everything in their neutrality. Covering and concealing. *Chandnis* at deaths, *chandnis* at weddings. How well the system fell into place when everything fell apart” (169; original italics). The whiteness of the fabric, its uncanny ability to transform space, becomes intrinsically linked to spatial segregation, which in turn is linked to domestic and architectural (re)organization, a major thematic thread of the novel. Where the canopy (covering the Maulana’s sehan) hides Shaheen—and her dangerous sexuality—from the other occupants of the house, the chandnis insulate their occupants from the news of the violence in the city reaching, and hence interrupting, their revelries. Both fabrics enclose—the canopy creates a literal enclosure that is harmful, while the chandnis create a figurative one that is protective, an embrace instead of suffocation.

The use of fabric sheets, the building of small walls to demarcate/allocate space and the use of various veils to mark gendered space are all linked to the Muslim veil and the gendering of space, as discussed by Fatima Mernissi (“Spatial Boundaries” 490).<sup>132</sup> The gendered division of space creates a zenana-type enclosure, inhabited and frequented mainly by women, which became a particularly dangerous space for women inhabiting

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<sup>132</sup> For Mernissi, there are strictly regulated, but often transgressed, borders between male (public) and female (private/domestic) space. The designated, strictly regulated female space (harem in Arab cultures, zenana in South Asia) remains particularly problematic for the restrictions it places on women’s access to education, jobs and other amenities. For her, the strict spatial division reflects the clear distinction between those who hold power (men) and those who do not (women) (“Spatial Boundaries” 490).

the zenana in *Blasphemy*. In *Mass Transit*, however, the exclusive use of dividing objects (the wall, the canopy), or objects signaling a division of space (the chandnis) both become invested with a specific type of gendered reading, creating new kinds of interstitial spaces. I use the term interstitial deliberately, to signal Homi K. Bhabha's explication and use of the term to apply to the identification of colonized "subjects". As I recount and critique Bhabha's conceptualizations of hybridity, interstitiality and third space, I remain aware of our differing contexts; my aim here is to deploy the terms in a new context (that of Pakistani women's negotiations of domestic and public spaces) while simultaneously questioning the distinctly patriarchal implications of celebrating an interstitial and/or hybrid identity.

In his Introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha uses the image of the staircase as an example of interstitial space, a liminal space that always defers permanence, encouraging movement between two poles, using an art installation in a stairwell by Renée Green, in which she "makes a metaphor of the museum building itself, rather than simply using the gallery space" (Bhabha 5). Bhabha valorizes this image of the stairwell as a "liminal space, in-between the designation of identity, [which] becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white" (5). For Bhabha, the stairwell, the passage, presumes temporality, movement and transition, which, in turn, seems to imply lack of fixity, without the assumption of hierarchy in the creation of difference in identification. His use of the stairwell as an illustration of interstitial, hybrid identity is problematic, partly because the direction of movement in a stairwell is always already predetermined by the very structure of the passage: one can only go up, or down, which, in turn,

introduces a hierarchy into the mix. A focus on the interstices, or in-between *passage*, implies a lack of movement, a fixity, at the same time as it valorizes the *possibility* of movement. How can one celebrate liminal, marginalized existence, then, if the liminality is a constant reminder of the *possibility* of movement without ever actually allowing mobility and transition? The chandnis, the wall, the stairwell and the courtyard, as well as the fabric canopy, to an extent, are all spatial dividing tools defining the use of spaces along specific, gendered, lines. They are invested with a specific kind of femininity, associating feminine social spaces with fixity rather than mobility, while simultaneously enhancing the ephemerality, the transience of those very spaces. No one ever stays permanently in a courtyard or a stairwell, for example, and yet, those are the very spaces where women socialize (Kadija with Ameneh and Safina) and even dwell (Shaheen, who lives under a canopy). Within the novel, specific portions of the house are used by the women to communicate with each other, to form bonds and to get news of the city beyond the enclosure of the mansion. Safina's portion of the sehan (courtyard), for example, is overlooked by the opperwalas, and is used as a "forum...in which the *opperwalas* could communicate with them. As Safina or Ameneh entered the house, someone would be at the window above looking down at them...Safina or Ameneh would often be summoned out into the *sehan* by the sound of one of the women upstairs shouting for one of them" (Naqvi 120; original italics). The sehan would, then, become the communal, specifically feminine space, as Anita Weiss's studies of women's use of space in the old city of Lahore remind us.<sup>133</sup> With exchanges conducted in stairwells and

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<sup>133</sup> Weiss discusses domestic architectural arrangements in detail to show how architectural settings define

corridors—Kadija, one of the women living in the upstairs portion of the mansion, hands Ameneh a mechanical *tasbi*<sup>134</sup> [rosary] in the stairwell dividing the two portions of the mansion—*Mass Transit* focuses almost exclusively on the liminal spaces that are occupied and used by women. The novel’s characterization of the courtyard seems to be a gesture towards the liminal spaces of the older, native city. Far from being isolated from each other, women in *Mass Transit* have specific interactions with each other, defined by their dwelling in liminal spaces, interactions that are particularly troubled, complicated by class and socio-economic status. The exchange of the mechanical *tasbi* in the corridor between Kadija and Ameneh, for example, is tinged with Ameneh’s reflections on the (inappropriate) use of “what the world intended as a monitor for the number of runners passing through a yellow tape at the end of a marathon...[which] had been transformed into a *tasbi*, a rosary, by Kadija” (Naqvi 61), a declaration which underlines the differences in class and education between Ameneh’s and Kadija’s families. Ameneh reads Kadija’s (mis)appropriation of the mechanical tallying device as evidence of her lack of education, or her lack of exposure to larger, global contexts.

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and confine women’s interactions with each other and society at large by focusing exclusively on the changing nature of domestic arrangements in her essay “The Gendered Division of Space”. Her locally specific research has shown that women’s vibrant social life is conducted in liminal, semi-private spaces like stair-wells, through windows and rooftops. In the old city of Lahore, women found ways to connect with each other without actually stepping into the forbidden, public, street. Constructions of new neighborhoods, modeled on the British colonial city, with its distinctions between homes and workplaces, changed women’s lives significantly, confining them to isolated existences in walled compounds and lawns of bungalow-type houses.

<sup>134</sup> A mechanical *tasbi* is a handheld tallying device that helps a person keep count with the click of a button. Meant as a counting device, it is sold as a device for tallying prayers, and functions in a manner similar to the traditional stringed and beaded rosary. The traditional Islamic rosary consists of 100 beads on a string, but the mechanical counter can go up to 9,999.

Another way to conceptualize the marginal and transient nature of these feminine spaces, and to trouble the constructions of the zenana itself, is to think through the architectural implications of closeting and locking away, especially since the novel contains multiple images of women either physically locked away within the domestic space (Shaheen) or trapped by social, economic norms (Hajra, Ameneh). As I have discussed already, Shaheen is literally trapped by her husband, the Maulana, at the behest of Hajra, under a fabric canopy as well as behind boarded up windows. Hajra, on the other hand, is trapped in an abusive relationship, one from which she cannot escape. Even when she tries to run away, she is brought back “though against her will” (134) and realizes that she is trapped in her marriage and her home, just like Shaheen is trapped in hers. Ameneh, a widow, is trapped in the house because she cannot live alone; she feels trapped because as long as she lives in the house, she will not be able to escape her memories of her husband.

In his essay “Closets, Clothes, Disclosure” Henry Urbach traces the historical evolution of the architectural closet in North America, and shows that the clothes closet, as a hidden extension within the walls of a bedroom, only came into existence in mid-nineteenth century America. Prior to that, the word “closet” referred to private spaces, in upper-class family homes, designed for reflection, quiet work, as a study, even as a place for religious reflection, like a small prayer room. Clothes were stored in armoires, or other pieces of furniture, not closets. A semantic, as well as a historical, link, then, can be established between spaces in a home designated for religious reflection, and spaces that are designed to be hidden from view, to be entered only by specific people for specific reasons. The historical evolution of the closet and its changing meaning helps Urbach

launch his own re-reading of the closet as an interstitial space, or rather, the space in front of the closet as an interstitial space. Urbach asks:

A private retreat, a small gathering space, a wall cavity for storage...in what ways can a 'closet' continue to unfold, opening itself up to other spatial forms, uses and meanings? Consider this: extending from the inside of the closet door frame to some distance in front of the closet, there is an interstitial space that appears, disappears and reappears again and again. Where the door slides or folds, the space is not so deep but, in the case of the ordinary hinged door, it is a space of considerable dimension. This is a space I call the ante-closet, the space before the closet. It is in the ante-closet where one selects clothes, where one dresses and undresses oneself, where one changes. (350)

I use this particular re-imagining of both the closet and the space created by the door in front of the closet to add further nuances to the architectural term, by placing it in a new socio-religious context. Where Urbach's context is Judeo-Christian and North American, I propose that the terms of his analysis—his historical uncovering of the changing meanings of the architectural closet—can be used to discuss the closeting away of particular types of identifications. Urbach's main concern is not to simply elucidate the historical use of the "closet" as an architectural feature, but to uncover the reasons behind the use of the word "closeting" for hidden gay and lesbian identifications. For Urbach, the closet is both a space used to store things, and a term used to conceal (and define simultaneously) a way of identification, specifically, homosexual identification. Urbach asserts that there is a similarity in the way in which the clothes closet hides clutter from view, and the way in which a closeted gay or lesbian identification hides homosexuality

from view in a normative heterosexual social setting (342). I propose that a similar logic can be used to discuss the closeting of femininity in an Islamic social setting, where patriarchy constructs zenanas and harems to control, define and confine femininity. I read the zenana-like space created by the construction of small walls in *Mass Transit*, and the implicit feminization of staircases, hallways and courtyards in the novel as liminal spaces, or as interstitial, ante-closet-like spaces, spaces that one can potentially use to change oneself, to assume particular transitional identities.

I have already discussed the imprisoned Shaheen's death as a catalyst for Safina's self-actualization as a diasporic immigrant who must be sent back to her new home, who may never be able feel "at home" in the house left behind. I also characterize Shaheen as the closeted feminine identity, the Pakistani-Muslim femininity that must be concealed from the (dangerous, presumed predatory) male gaze. Shaheen is, moreover, the dangerous female sexuality that threatens the security of the upper-class women sharing the tenement with her. We are told that the Maulana had not initially thought of putting up physical barriers to protect his wife, his honour, from strange men. It is only after Hajra's jealous comments that Shaheen becomes a prisoner in her own home, literally locked up every morning by her husband. As the canopy goes up, and the windows are boarded up, other occupants of the house read it as the Maulana's attempt to construct a zenana in his house, to create a segregated space that is to protect and guard femininity and/or female sexuality. Where Urbach's analysis, however, hinges upon the invisibility of the closet door, here, it is the (ugly) visibility of the closeting mechanism that draws attention to the (uninhabitable) closet, and the feminine "wiles" being deliberately hidden away. Is Safina, then, the person who steps into the interstitial space "in front of the



closet” in order to change herself? She steps into the closet itself when she follows rescuers into Shaheen’s burning house, and is changed after her encounter with her, when she begins to regret her own remoteness from the inhabitants of both the mansion and the city, a remoteness born of class-consciousness and privilege. Hajra, the woman responsible for Shaheen’s imprisonment, on the other hand, watches the windows being boarded up in complete silence (131). After her failed attempt at running away from her abusive relationship, Hajra “would stand in the window looking down. She couldn’t see the *sehan* below. Only the burlap canopy, blocking out the *sehan* from peering eyes above. [...] How did she breathe, with windows boarded up?” (134; original italics). It is only after Hajra is made aware of her own powerlessness that she can begin to wonder about the effects of the entrapment, and closeting, on Shaheen. Hajra’s location, in the proverbial ante-closet of Urbach’s delineation, then could potentially empower her. However, Hajra herself is the disempowered woman, and can do no more than empathize with Shaheen, and that, too, from afar. Shaheen’s “closet”, her zenana, like the zenana in *Blasphemy*, is an enclosure that entraps and ensnares female sexuality, but unlike the zenana in *Blasphemy*, Shaheen’s zenana is constructed at the behest of one powerless woman (Hajra, who only thinks she has power) and is used by another to construct her own sense of identification—Shaheen’s imprisonment under the canopy and behind the boarded up windows is ignored by Safina, who is irritated by the ugliness of the canopy, and completely ignores “the misery that lived under it” (Naqvi 166). Unlike in *Blasphemy*, where trapped, abused women find ways to form alliances in order to resist, and escape, patriarchal violence, the women in *Mass Transit* do not band together. Part of the reason for this non-acknowledgement of “sisterhood” stems from the differences in

class and socio-economic status that the novel consistently highlights. Even though most of the women feel trapped in the mansion, there is no sense of shared feelings of oppression—each woman views the others as liberated and free.

Interestingly, both Hajra and Shaheen belong to a similar socio-economic group—the working class or the lower-middle-class—and yet both are pitted against one another, competing for power. Hajra finds it impossible to accept her husband's infidelity and the rumors circulating about his attraction to Shaheen. She sees them both flirting with each other, and decides to "warn" the maulana, but only after receiving a beating at her own husband's hands for questioning him (Naqvi 92). Shaheen's shock at Hajra's conversation with the maulana is palpable, but Hajra chooses to ignore it, trying desperately to maintain some form of control over her own disintegrating relationship. Safina, on the other hand, has the potential power to stop the maulana from imprisoning his wife completely. Unattached, and free, Safina could have rescued Shaheen long before the stove burst, but she "had never thought of the misery that lived under it, she who was so free..." (Naqvi 166). It was far more important for Safina to beautify her house, easier for her to ignore the reality of Shaheen's condition, than to use her power born of privilege to attempt to improve Shaheen's condition. In her reflections on Shaheen's death, it becomes apparent that even Safina views herself as trapped, ensnared by her Aunt Sophie's exhortations to ignore the realities of her location and the violence in the city.

Domestic architecture in Pakistan seeks to quite literally cloak the female body, while maintaining a strict polemic between public and private. This particular polemic is nowhere more obvious than in the liminal spaces of the tenement-mansion in *Mass*

*Transit*. The women of all three families have their own spaces for interacting with each other, and for ensuring specific types of social interactions. Ameneh is given the gift of a mechanical *tasbi* (Muslim rosary) in a stairwell by Hajra (Naqvi 61), regular conversations are carried out through windows and in the courtyards (Naqvi 119-121), and Hajra uses her vantage point (windows on the upper level) to watch for her husband, keep an eye on her neighbours and to maintain her control over her marriage (Naqvi 102). The novel also expands the liminality of particular spaces by drawing attention to the tools used to define spatiality—the small wall, chandnis, carpets and the burlap canopy.

#### 4.6 Conclusion

In spite of its “plotless” and meandering nature, *Mass Transit* provides a significant critique of class, economic privilege, and “Western” order, while providing a personalized history of a city that has received little or no attention in academic circles. Naqvi’s goal, in writing the novel, had been to preserve the political history of a major metropolitan city, but she has managed to simultaneously underline and critique major assumptions about architecture and women’s use of domestic space. The novel complicates issues of migration, transnationality, diasporic existence and treatment of women in a Muslim society in order to undermine the idea that religion can be separated from cultural practice. The veiling and segregation system is completely ingrained in the social dynamics of Safina’s native city, as well as those of her household, so much so that it becomes invisible, unremarked in the everyday behavior of the characters. Where *Blasphemy* presented a view of the purdah system that was intrinsically attached to religious injunctions and their interpretations, *Mass Transit* is inherently secular in its depiction of women’s travels through multiple spaces. The internalization of the

segregative principles is a result of the character's adherence to social norms, not to their own belief in the religious principles. It is the designation of specific spaces within a household as feminine (and thus, liminal) spaces that controls and directs women's behavior and interactions with other, more public, spaces. The novel characterizes domestic space as a specific type of space, one that is intrinsically fractured and full of liminal, communal spaces that are used mainly by women to conduct vibrant, albeit troubled, social lives, but also one that is regulated by class and economy, preventing women from forming a powerful sisterhood. While maintaining its focus on the tenement-mansion, the novel also presents a portrait of Safina's interactions with the city of Karachi, devoting some space to Safina's navigations of public spaces within the city, as well as space to the city's historical evolution. In her travels through these multiple types of spaces, Safina is forced to acknowledge her own powerlessness in the face of deep-rooted patriarchal controls over women's mobility, but at the same time, she is forced to acknowledge her own complicity in the maintenance of patriarchy—it is far more convenient, even expedient, to ignore Shaheen's and Hajra's plights, than to use her position of power (born of class and privilege) to help those women "fight back".

## Chapter 4

### 5 Performed Interventions, Mirrored Convictions: Performing the Zenana on PTV and the Theatre

#### 5.1 Introduction

My first chapter on the historical evolution of the segregation system in Pakistan showed that the purdah system in Pakistan has defined, and confined, women's participation in public service industries as well as in public media. This chapter, on Shahid Nadeem's *Neelay Haath [Blue Hands]*, a Pakistani drama serial first broadcast during the May-July 1989 season, shows how the serial addresses the impact of General Zia-ul-Haq's veiling decree and of the different misogynistic laws on the portrayal of women's stories on Pakistan Television (PTV). I begin with a brief introduction to the PTV Drama serial as a genre, and to its viewing audiences, tracing the genre from its inception in the mid 1960's to the post-Zia era of the late 1980's. I then move onto an analysis of *Neelay Haath*, to show that Zia's veiling decree had a specific impact on the portrayal of women on public television, and on the topics chosen for dramatization. The latter half of the chapter will counterbalance my reading of *Neelay Haath* with Nadeem's theatrical farce, "Burqavaganza",<sup>135</sup> a play that, literally, uses the "burqa" as a concealing agent,<sup>136</sup> a metaphor for cover-ups of corruption and sexism in Pakistan's governmental institutions. In both instances—the drama serial and the theatrical farce—the veil

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<sup>135</sup> The title is a play on the urdu word "burqa" and the English word "extravaganza". The compound word signals the farcical, fantastical imagery of the production, as well as its satire of the burqa itself.

<sup>136</sup> Nadeem's use of the veil as a cover-up, a diaphanous curtain is reminiscent of both Irigaray's contemplations on veils and of the Islamic etymology of the word "hijab" as discussed in my first chapter.

functions as a symbol of class, rebellion (on the part of women who use the dupatta in myriad ways to express their emotions), and even as a mask, but the underlying religious injunction to veil a Muslim woman's body—manifested in the “chador aur chardewari” [veil and the four walls] slogan—is not challenged, nor questioned. Nadeem's use of the burqa as metaphor in “Burqavaganza” and of the dupatta as a cue to emotional and class drama in *Neelay Haath*, hyper-politicizes the veil itself for the nation at large, while simultaneously de-politicizing it for the women who wear it. In reducing the veil to a symbol—of emotion, of chastity, of class, even of institutional cover-ups and corruption—Nadeem ignores the segregative principles underlying the institution of veiling and purdah, principles that continue to exercise control over women's mobility and participation in the labour market in Pakistan.

*Neelay Haath* was first telecast about eight months (in 1989) after General Zia-ul-Haq's death (1988). The mere fact that a drama serial showcasing the regime's oppressive laws could only be broadcast after Zia's death highlights the control of the state over popular media like television and radio. My analysis of the portrayal of feminism in the drama serial shows that even though the play does not address the issue of purdah directly, it inevitably foregrounds the issues that are evidence of the deep-rooted belief in, and acceptance of, the veiling system in Pakistan, one that is left unchallenged partly because of the fact that the system is internalized by some Pakistani women, so much so that it becomes part and parcel of their everyday social behavior, as I have discussed in my first chapter in detail. Since a form of veiling has been enjoined within the Quran itself, and has also been taken up by the state as its fundamental policy towards women during the 1980's (the belief that women's proper place is in the home,

behind its four walls and the veil, encapsulated in the Urdu phrase “chador aur chardewari”), feminists are wary of questioning and challenging the assumption, preferring to focus all their attention on social and legal reforms, which, in turn, is a problematic compromise at best, as I have argued throughout this dissertation. A comparison of *Neelay Haath* to Shahid Nadeem’s most recent theatrical farce “Burqavaganza” and the controversy surrounding its performance,<sup>137</sup> will help nuance the specific feminist responses to the veil itself. Where *Neelay Haath* contains only subtle references to the segregation system, “Burqavaganza” uses the burqa and the veiling system as a metaphor for masks and cover-ups. Yet in both the performances, the veil itself is left unquestioned and unchallenged. In his introduction to “Burqavaganza”, for example, Nadeem points out that the play’s critique of the burqa is not directed at the Quranic injunction for women’s purdah. According to Nadeem, the play “uses the burqa as a metaphor and nowhere does it make any derogatory reference to those who wear the burqa or to anyone’s beliefs” (284). My analyses of Nadeem’s plays highlight the complex relationship of Pakistani feminism with the veiling and segregation system.

Given the silence surrounding the veiling system in Pakistani feminist writing and performance,<sup>138</sup> one begins to wonder if it is simply convenient to ignore the issue, to use the veil strategically instead, in order to voice concerns and to launch protests. Pakistani

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<sup>137</sup> The play’s depiction of the burqa as a cover-up for institutional corruption was seen by politicians and the religious right as a direct attack on the purdah system, and by extension, on Islam. A verbal ban was pronounced in Parliament in 2007, but never implemented and the play was finally performed in a different location. I will discuss this controversy in detail in the latter half of this chapter.

<sup>138</sup> My detailed discussion of Pakistani feminists in my first chapter has shown that feminists continue to ignore the veiling and segregation system, and attempt to use it to win other concessions from the Pakistani state. Even when the system is linked to patriarchal oppression, as in Kermani’s video, the veil itself, the dupatta or the chador, are used as symbols of chastity and modesty by feminists.

feminisms have used religion almost the same way as the Pakistani state has done, to justify or to strengthen claims for emancipation. While protesting the proposed Law of Evidence in 1983, for example, WAF members cited examples from Hadith and Sunna, showing that the Prophet Muhammad had accepted the testimony of a single woman in a criminal case (Weiss “Women’s Position” 871-872). During one of their protest marches in 1983, the demonstrating members of the WAF (most of whom belonged to upper-class households) were “lathi-charged [attacked by batons]” (Weiss “Women’s Position” 871) by the Islamabad police and several women were beaten, and arrested forcibly. The complaint lodged by the WAF highlighted the mistreatment of women at the hands of “na-mahrem [unrelated]” men, who had no religious right to touch the protesting women (Korson 606), a complaint that uses the veiling and segregation system as a tool that protects women from unwanted attention by unrelated men. The complaint can be read as an attempt to turn the state’s official “chador aur chardewari” policy on its head, a policy that was ostensibly designed to protect women. For Pakistani feminism, then, the Islamic attitudes towards gender segregation—of which the veiling system is an integral part—are convenient political tools to be used to gain specific footholds in the Pakistani political landscape.<sup>139</sup> In a country where the mere sight of an unveiled woman could invoke public harassment, the veil becomes a necessary shield, a protective cover, one that cannot be discarded easily. Mumtaz and Shaheed have shown that anytime the question of the veil’s necessity has been raised, it has been treated as an attempt to

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<sup>139</sup> An example of the use of the veil to gain a foothold in Pakistani politics is Benazir Bhutto’s adoption of the muslim dupatta to cover her head throughout her political career. As I have shown in my first chapter, her gesture allowed her to gain political legitimacy as a “chaste” woman, but was read by some Pakistani feminists as pandering to the religious right. See Pigott’s article for more details.



distract women from their true goal, which is to emancipate women socially and legally. When the Pakistani constitution itself is gender-biased, due to the Hudood Ordinances and other family laws that favour men over women, activists argue, the veiling and segregation system has to be left unchallenged so that bigger political battles can be fought. The portrayal of feminist issues on PTV and the furor surrounding Nadeem's farcical representation of the burqa, meanwhile, show that questioning the veiling system in and of itself can only lead to political suicide. The veil itself, as well as the segregation system, I argue, is invariably viewed as the only system that protects women from unrelated male predators. It is this assumption that needs to be challenged by subsequent generations of Pakistani feminists, artists and performers.

## 5.2 PTV: Inception and Nature of Programming in the 1970's and 1980's

Pakistani media, both electronic and print, has remained under state control and censorship since its launch. In his essay "Good Times, Bad Times" in the book, *Pakistan Television ke 25 saal/25 Years of PTV*, Muhammad Hanif has shown that PTV rented a shed "on the premises of the Lahore Arts Council for one thousand rupees a month on the condition that it would be vacated daily for the painting classes" (Hanif 24) in 1964. By 1996, there were five PTV Centers, which averaged "more than 82 hours of broadcasting each week, not taking into account live sports coverage, the coverage of festivals, etc" (Tahir 114). At PTV's inception, with a total of 200 television sets donated by NEC of Japan, installed in various public places all over Pakistan (Hanif 24), the first few broadcasts consisted of general entertainment fare—a quiz show and a program for women—filmed using actors and crew from stage and radio. At its inauguration, PTV was charged with clearing "the misconception from people's minds, about the

government” (Hanif 24) by General Ayub Khan.<sup>140</sup> Within a year, the medium had gained immense popularity, and that is when the state took control of its content. The control was exercised mainly over news broadcasts in the 1970’s, but was expanded to entertainment programs and commercial advertising under Zia’s regime (1977-1988). These controls were relaxed briefly by Benazir Bhutto (1989), which allowed the broadcast of drama serials like *Neelay Haath*, serials that focused on the representations of social issues plaguing the Pakistani populace. State control over media was reinstated by Nawaz Sharif in 1991, but was restricted to control over news broadcasts by 1992. Since General Pervez Musharraf’s dictatorship (1999-2008), the broadcast industry has seen a renaissance. In 2002, according to Tahir H. Naqvi, Musharraf created the first licencing and regulatory body for private electronic media (112). Where there were a total of three channels broadcast in the mid-1990’s, one of which was state-controlled, thirty-five stations have begun broadcasting to and from Pakistan since 2001 (T. Naqvi 109), modeled on North-American cable TV, including American and European channels like CNBC, CNN, BBC and HBO, catering to “the domestic hunger for news in the wake of the events of 11 September” (T. Naqvi 109).

Pakistan Television (PTV) began its first colour broadcast in 1976 (Tahir 114). Political coverage on television began in 1970, with “the election broadcasts by leaders of political parties. PTV’s political coverage expanded in the next couple of years to show a trilogy of interviews by foreign journalists with Sheikh Mujib, Mr. Bhutto and Mrs.

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<sup>140</sup> General Ayub Khan was the first military dictator of Pakistan, ruling the country from 1958 to 1969 and has been considered to be the most progressive of Pakistan’s three dictators.

Indira Gandhi [leaders of West Pakistan, East Pakistan and India respectively]” (Tahir 116). Tahir sees the 1970’s as the dynamic period for PTV, and attributes that vitality to the youth of the production staff and of lack of bureaucratic control over programming decisions. After the 1977 coup, however, PTV saw an intense decline in both programming and journalistic freedom. According to Tahir, even though the new dictatorship ensured complete freedom to PTV, a strike by television workers was suppressed by force: “28 workers were arrested...and six of them were sentenced to one year’s detention and 15 lashes by a summary military court” (Tahir 116). Tahir then dismisses the Zia years by asserting that the period “was marked by the General’s crude use of the electronic media for projecting himself and attacking his opponents. Objective analysis and opposing view points were completely forbidden” (116-117).

### 5.3 PTV and the Drama Serial Format

The drama serial on PTV is episodic in nature. Each serial lasts about 3 months, with each episode an hour in length (Kothari 294). The roots of the episodic PTV drama serial can be traced to the Persian *Dastaan*, or long story, as well as linked to melodramatic story-telling (Kothari 296-298). The drama serial in the 1970’s and 1980’s was telecast in primetime (8 pm-9 pm) with up to three drama serials broadcast each week, running every quarter, two of them usually re-runs (Kothari 294). Kothari’s interviews with urban women viewers of PTV drama serials have shown that women prefer to watch most drama serials alone, or in the company of other women (293). The target audience for most PTV plays was women, often written and produced by women,

centered on topics relevant to the home and the family (Kothari 294). Kothari equates that community of women with the formation of a virtual zenana,<sup>141</sup> with women congregating in front of their television sets, carrying on conversations about the plays in school and on college campuses and through Urdu magazines, which often discussed plotlines and characters under the heading of “zanani baatain [women’s discussions]” (294).

In his essay “Television drama kay teen adwaar [Television Drama’s Three Eras]” Rasheed Umar Thanvi divides the twenty five years of PTV drama serials into three significant eras. The first era, according to him, lasted four years (from 1964-1968), during which drama serials were telecast live, due to lack of proper recording and broadcasting equipment. The second era lasted eight years (from 1968 to 1976), during which acquisition of proper recording, editing and broadcasting facilities helped introduce innovations into the drama serial format, and expanded the repertoire of the drama serial creators. This is the era to which Tahir refers, when she attributes the laudable quality of PTV plays to the youth of the PTV staff. The third era, according to Thanvi began in the late 1970’s, includes the 1990’s, and is distinguished by technical advancements and an expanding audience. As the reach of PTV increased, so did state control over its broadcasts. Where PTV gained technical superiority, state control over content meant that quality of programming remained unrivalled, but content was restricted to pre-defined and “acceptable” images. Babar Ali, in his critique of the PTV

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<sup>141</sup> According to Kothari, since most drama serials were written by women, produced for women, and consumed by women, the production and reception of most drama serials can be categorized as a discursive, zenana-like space, one that is visible to men, but rarely ever inhabited by them (294).

line-up during the 1980's, asserts that most people prefer to watch Doordarshan (the state-run Indian channel, PTV's Indian equivalent of the 1980's) "despite the fact that most people do not consider Indian TV technically better than Pakistan's" for "at least there is no Zia, no Junejo and no mullah to bore them" (Ali 2172). In other words, even though PTV drama serials improved technically in terms of bigger casts, newer filming and broadcasting techniques and seasoned acting by performers, content itself was dedicated to showcasing Zia's vision of an Islamized Pakistan, especially in the 1980's. Hanif shows, for example, that in 1978, "seven of the 15 programmes announced for the new quarter were religious floors [sic] shows and when the quarter began viewers discovered that the other eight were simply lame excuses for official sermons on morality" (29).

Kothari shows that General Zia-ul-Haq's association of female visibility with obscenity had a direct impact on PTV programming, with drama serials reflecting women as the root cause of all of men's problems. Even though most of the restrictions placed on PTV were lifted after Zia's death, during Benazir Bhutto's first term, they were reinstated in the 1990's by Nawaz Sharif (Kothari 294). Widespread protests by journalists and performers critiquing the reinstatement of government policies regarding the representation of women in media (including PTV) led to Sharif's repealing of the directives in 1992. Those protests were not possible under General Zia's Martial Law (1977-1988). Analysts of PTV programming like Tahir and Kothari suggest that apart from the Zia and Sharif regimes, government policies had little impact on cultural entertainment and advertising slots on PTV, with most regimes restricting their control over the media to news broadcasts. According to Zohra Yousuf, during the Zia years,

“[t]hrough this powerful audiovisual medium [PTV], the ideological frontiers of the mind were to be conquered by the state-appointed defenders of the faith ... Sermons were no longer confined to the pulpit but were delivered through plays, talk shows and other programmes” (20). According to Hanif, programmes showcasing dance and music were taken off the air, deemed to be “‘repugnant’ to our newly discovered culture. Other ideological changes included ‘proper dress’ for women appearing on TV, no film songs and no film starlets” (Hanif 29). During General Zia’s regime, (and briefly during Nawaz Sharif’s first Prime Ministership), the dupatta policy (that asked all women appearing on PTV, even those performing in entertainment programs, to wear a chador and cover their heads), among others, had a direct impact on the portrayal of women in the television drama serial, drawing clear distinctions between “respectable”, and non-respectable women.

#### 5.4 The Dupatta Policy and its Impact: The Zia Regime’s Control over Women’s Appearance on and Participation in PTV Programming.

In 1980, Zia’s government issued a directive “ordering all women government employees to wear Islamic dress. This meant that women were to be forced to wear a *chador* over whatever they were wearing, and cover their heads. The first women to be affected were the female announcers on government-controlled television” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 77). Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed recount the effects of these directives on the lived realities of women, showing that, instead of following the Quranic injunction to men to lower their eyes (as a sign of respect) in the presence of women, the government’s (and the print and television media’s) equation of women with obscenity led to an intense scrutiny of women, laying them open to harassment, abuse and violation

of their right to public amenities. According to Mumtaz and Shaheed, “[f]rom official campaigns and government controlled television, it appeared that the only manner in which the rapid deterioration of society could be checked was by eradicating the presence of women altogether” (82-83).

The terms of the series of directives made it appear as if it was to prevent the exploitation of women on public media, to ensure that women were not used by advertising executives to sell particular products, and to ensure modesty and respectability for women working in government services like teaching in schools and colleges and other civil services. To that end, women were banned from appearing in advertisements for products that were not considered specifically feminine products. Mumtaz and Shaheed, in their discussion of the veiling and segregation system under Zia, show that the government’s campaign against obscenity “seemed to equate women *per se* with obscenity” (81; original italics). The 1980’s government attempt to eliminate women from commercials of products that were not relevant to women, for example,

provoked the answer that all commodities were relevant to women, except perhaps men’s underwear, and even that was questionable. In fact, the government seemed less concerned about obscenity or the misuse of women in advertising than projecting a particular image of women, defined by sewing machines, detergents and other items of housework. (Mumtaz and Shaheed 81)

Another directive restricted female models from appearing for more than 25 per cent of the total time for any commercial. The appearance of the models was also pre-defined: they were to wear “a high-collared, full-sleeved national dress with a *dupatta*” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 82). By 1982, these restrictions were extended to print media, restricting

photographs of women, specifically of those in the entertainment industry. Women were literally deemed to be synonymous with obscenity, corruption and immorality: “If women were harassed, killed, or raped in the streets, or at home, it was because women had provoked these attacks by their speech, action, or just their very presence” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 82).

Interestingly, the directives concerning women’s dress and appearance were ignored by the different branches of the WAF (Women’s Action Forum) who chose to remain curiously silent about the veiling issue, preferring to focus their energies, instead, on legal amendments to the constitution proposed by the government, like the Haddood Ordinances and the Law of Evidence, as discussed in my first chapter. The Karachi chapter of the WAF issued a statement that criticized the government directives about the chador and the banning of actresses’ pictures from the print media for their inconsistency and hypocrisy, but the issue of women’s dress itself was not challenged. Mumtaz and Shaheed’s discussion of the WAF’s reaction to the directive banning women entertainers from press coverage shows that the Karachi chapter did not actually react to the compulsory veiling of women, nor to the specific dress code enjoined by the government, but to the attack on women’s economic independence. The Karachi chapter’s statement in the press asserts that entertainers rely heavily on public exposure for their livelihoods, and banning women from press coverage has a significant impact on women’s earnings (Mumtaz and Shaheed 82).

Literature about the impact of Islamization on women’s lives does not discuss the impact of the government’s directives concerning women’s dress, behavior and even the types of employment options available to them. Critics like Anita Weiss, Shahnaz Khan,



and even Shahnaz Rouse have given considerable amounts of space to the Haddood Ordinances<sup>142</sup> as well as to the laws of Qisas and Diyat,<sup>143</sup> among others, but have spent little, or no, time on the government's requirement for "modest" attire. Cultural texts like Sheema Kermani's music video, analyzed in detail in my first chapter, highlight the veiling and segregation system as a symbol of patriarchal, institutional misogyny and oppression, but even then, the veil itself is not completely rejected. Women who are freed from the (architectural) enclosures of patriarchal oppression still wear a form of the veil—the dupatta in Kermani's video—to signal chastity and modesty, even if the dupatta is slung across shoulders carelessly. Since Islamic scholars all agree on the requirement for some form of veil for women, one begins to wonder if the chador is left unquestioned precisely because it becomes the symbol of unity for women. If all women wear the veil, in some form or the other, then men have to presume chastity and virtue and hence, have to show respect to them at all costs, leaving them "free" to gain access to, and then remain in, the labour market.

The Zia government's official policy towards women was that women should remain devoted to the "chador aur chardewari," a mandate that underlined every government policy with regards to women. Even when women's dress code itself was not

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<sup>142</sup> I have included a detailed description of the legal changes introduced by Zia-ul-Haq in my introductory chapter. The Haddood Ordinances were introduced by Zia in the 1980's, ostensibly to Islamize the laws of Pakistan. The laws targeted "hadd" crimes of theft, adultery, slander and consumption of alcohol. In practice and implementation, the laws targeting adultery invariably discriminated against women, turning victims of rape into adulteresses due to a specific loophole in the framing of the law.

<sup>143</sup> As recounted in my first chapter, the laws of qisas and diyat refer to the Islamic concept of "eye for an eye" or bloodmoney. According to the law, as drafted into the constitution, the price paid to the family of a murdered woman is half that of a murdered man's, but the punishment meted out for murder remains the same for both men and women.

being defined by government directives, the demand for the veil and the zenana underscored various policies. As I have indicated in my first chapter, the government attempted to segregate the genders by proposing separate universities for women (which would educate girls and women in such “important” skills as Home Economics and Sewing), banned women from participating in spectator sports and attempted to ban women from holding high-level posts in the Foreign Offices. In their discussion of these policies, Mumtaz and Shaheed show that there were no written directives issued at any official level. According to them, the attempts at segregating women were executed, and then withdrawn in an almost haphazard manner. Afraid of international reprobation, for example, the official stance remained one of progress and inclusion, but in implementation, women were discriminated against in specific ways, leaving the discrimination almost impossible to protest. If there is no official policy, how does one react to mere accusations? During the 1980’s, for example, women were effectively banned from participating in spectator sports like Field Hockey and International Track and Field events, but no written directives were issued. Training camps were broken up, trips cancelled and sportswomen were told to go home (Mumtaz and Shaheed 90). According to Mumtaz and Shaheed, when WAF took up the issue, they learnt that no written directive forbidding women from participating in spectator sports had been issued, but verbal orders had been sent down, on the insistence of the religious lobby, who protested that women’s participation in spectator sports exposed women to *na-mahram* [unrelated] men’s gazes (90-91) which is a direct manifestation of the Islamic injunction requiring gender segregation. The official government policy on women’s sports was that “women would be allowed to play sports (and would be encouraged), but

within segregated compounds, and while Pakistani women athletes were free to play international teams under Islamic conditions within the country, they would not be allowed to proceed abroad” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 91). Exceptions to this rule existed: wives and daughters of serving Army Generals participated in international events without any official repercussions, and ostensibly segregated sports tournaments were filmed and photographed by male journalists without inciting protests (Mumtaz and Shaheed 94). I have already shown that the WAF was formed by daughters and granddaughters of the political elite. If their lives were left unaffected by government policies modeled on the “chador aur chardewari” mandate, then feminists had little to gain in taking up the fight against the veiling and segregation system.

The different directives concerning women’s participation in public, government related services and events also went unchallenged partly because the military regime used force to ensure subjugation of, and compliance by, the populace. Fear of retaliation by the regime was all-pervasive, and, thus, most of its policies and directives were simply followed. Anita Weiss has shown that, since the regime used Islam to legitimize its power, any questioning of its proposals and laws was deemed to be anti-Islamic, and that disagreement with any portion of Quranic law was tantamount to disagreement with the entire Quran, which, in turn is blasphemous and punishable under the blasphemy law<sup>144</sup> (Weiss “Women’s Position” 874). In their discussion of the public reaction to the WAF’s

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<sup>144</sup> The Blasphemy law makes “blasphemy” punishable by death. The law defines blasphemy as the dishonor of Islam and its Prophet Muhammad through deed, words, or even suggestive gestures.

rally of 1983,<sup>145</sup> Korson and Maskiell show that major newspapers cited the ulema [religious leaders] as declaring WAF's stance against the Law of Evidence as tantamount to a war against God's commands (606).

Since PTV itself is a government owned institution, with all employees of PTV (writers, directors, actors, cameramen etc) being considered government employees, these state policies had an immediate impact on the types of programs being broadcast. As I have noted already, strict government regulation of PTV programming meant an increase in "religious" shows or programming that showcased Zia's vision of an Islamic society. According to Tahir, the population covered by PTV broadcasts in 1964 was 9.32 percent, but by 1988, 86.39 percent of Pakistan's population was receiving PTV broadcasts (114). With the collection of TV licensing fees in the early 1970's (Hanif 28), PTV became a profitable medium, sometimes the only source of entertainment in Pakistan (Hanif 27), which helped the quality of programming improve steadily, with the PTV drama serial being considered superior to those being broadcast by Doordarshan, PTV's Indian equivalent, at least technically. As the reach of PTV surpassed the penetration of the print media into the largely rural population of Pakistan, the broadcasts of PTV had a perceptible impact on the populace. Pakistan has a literacy rate of 49.9 percent (Latif 425), with a literate person defined by Pakistan's Ministry of Education as a person who can read a newspaper and write a simple letter in any language (Latif 424). Among the literate, 61.7 percent are men and only 35.2 percent are women. With almost half of the population illiterate, control over PTV broadcasts translated into control over

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<sup>145</sup> In February 1983, WAF Lahore organized a major political rally protesting the proposed Law of Evidence. The rally was suppressed by force by the police, and several women were arrested.

the population's perception of the ruling elite, including the Feudal elite. Technical improvements in the quality of drama serials did not always, however, translate into improvements in topics and themes being represented in PTV drama serials. The representation of women, for example, in those drama serials, was restricted to specific, state-sanctioned and approved "types", to which I now turn.

### 5.5 Women's Representation in PTV Plays During the Zia Regime (1977-1988)

The story-lines of PTV plays from the 1980's, during Zia's Islamization of the country, conformed irrevocably to state policies, reflecting values considered to be intrinsic to a specific, state-defined, Islamic, Pakistani identity. That identity, according to Hanif, revolved irrevocably around the portrayal of rural life centered on feudal lords and their excesses on PTV, in plays like *Waris* (1979), *Dehleez* (1981), *Samandar* (1983) and *Piyas* (1989)<sup>146</sup> (Hanif 29-30). In spite of the portrayal of, and popularity of, rural themes and issues on PTV, the rural population itself remained "passive recipients at best and not participants in the projection of their image on the electronic medium. Whether studio-created for plays on rural themes, or documented on film, the perceptions of the rural population are essentially communicated through urban eyes" (Yousaf 21). PTV plays invariably portrayed stereotypical images of the illiterate, suppressed farmers, and submissive, often-abused, invariably silenced women who were ruled by tyrannical, all-

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<sup>146</sup> All of these serials focused specifically on the excesses of the landed elite—feudal lords, jagirdars and zamindars, and were huge hits. Lines and characters from these plays became intertexts for subsequent serials about rural-life in Pakistan.

powerful landowners characterized as being of the “eyeball-rolling variety who met an honourable death in the last episode” (Hanif 30).

Neelam Hussain, in tracing the representation of women in PTV shows, asserts that most drama serials of the 1980’s reflected state attitudes towards women, depicting them in stereotypical roles. According to Hussain, Zia’s “retrogressive policy” (“Television Drama” 25) defined women’s roles on television as those of devoted wives and mothers, confined to the four walls of their home, shrouded by an all-enveloping veil of silence and obedience to patriarchal rules of proper feminine comportment. When outlining the roles assigned to women during the Zia years, Hussain asserts that

[t]he woman’s domain is shown as being limited to the home and to her role as wife/ mother/ sister/ daughter. The figure of the wife is especially critical to the production of meaning in plays. Posited as the faithful mate, responsible mother, and by implication believing Muslim (PTV does not acknowledge religious difference), this schema not only fortifies the integration of these different identities, it also grants her the burden of guilt ...Further, the entire focus is on her reproductive or potentially reproductive and nurturing capacities, and no space is allowed where her economic dimension might be acknowledged.

(“Television Drama” 25-26)

Hussain’s study of PTV plays broadcast during Zia’s regime concludes that the plays precluded any possibility of a strong independent woman who was also morally and intrinsically a “good” woman. In all portrayals, a woman, “by becoming independent and articulate... would automatically forfeit both her femininity and her man” (Hussain “Television Drama” 30). The only roles available to women, then, were restricted to

those associated with men i.e. as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters or widows. The unmarried women (spinsters, older unmarried sisters) were invariably portrayed as eccentric and irrational, while the unmarried single girls were often portrayed as being in need of male (brother's and/or father's) protection, often confined to the home, where their sole purpose was to ensure the happiness of their fathers and brothers, thus maintaining the status quo (Hussain "Television Drama" 30-32). PTV plays and drama serials conformed to the state's belief that women's true place was in the home, their sole purpose in life being that of ensuring the happiness and success of the male members of her family. Considerable broadcasting time<sup>147</sup> was allocated to religious programming which included the broadcast of scholars like Dr. Israr, who was a strong proponent of the Islamic segregation system. As Shahnaz Rouse has shown, the weekly broadcast of Dr. Israr's invective against women, combined with the banning of women from appearing on TV without their heads covered, proved to be a "reinforcement for the sentiments of many men who have never accepted the notion of women being equal or deserving independence" (Rouse "Women's Movement" 32). This idea was depicted consistently in plays from the 1980's, with even self-proclaimed feminist writers and directors ensuring that the women they depicted on TV remained subservient to the "chador aur chardewari" idea, constructing the home (synonymous with which is the idea of the nuclear family) as the only safe place for women (Kothari 296). Even when women are portrayed as attempting to, or succeeding in, leaving their tumultuous homes, they

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<sup>147</sup> As cited already, Hanif has shown that almost 50% of new shows announced for the new quarter in 1978 were religious shows, and the rest were shows that toed the state line on morality.

invariably return to their husband's house, learning to recognize it as their safe haven, in spite of the turbulence (of domestic violence, for example). Neelam Hussain discusses a number of TV drama serials, and shows that more often than not, women were depicted as embroiled in sado-masochistic relationships with men, accepting abuse and violence at the hands of their male "protectors" in exchange for economic, financial stability.

According to Hussain, Muslim women in Pakistan have been caught in a vicious cycle: they have been taught to believe that their sole purpose in life is to gain the trust of their husband, which can only happen through lies and subterfuge, which in turn reinforces the assumption that women are manipulative and deceitful, and that they would do anything in their power to ensure control over their husband's finances (Hussain "Women" 15).

This reading of women's roles as manipulative, scheming wives, mothers and sisters suggests a particular kind of agency on the part of those women, given the alternative stereotypical image of the silent, submissive, oppressively veiled feminine beauty (Shaheen from *Mass Transit* and Heer from *Blasphemy*) that I have been foregrounding in this dissertation so far. Given the complex characterization of the ideal feminine role in Islamic—specifically Pakistani—society, the scheming, manipulative woman becomes one to be despised, however. Hussain, among other critics, has shown that women in Islam have been characterized as both pure (as self-sacrificing mothers, for example) as well as "fitna" or chaos, due to their feminine sexuality (characterized by the *femme fatale*). The ideal woman, then, would be one who could control her inherent sexuality consciously "to serve the interests of the community (which is male)" (Hussain "Women" 12). The manipulative woman engaged in a power struggle with her male protector, in



this scenario, would be deemed a “bad woman”, unable to control her impulses in the interests of her community.

After the Zia era, the veil is invested even more with women’s expressions of autonomy. A complete rejection of the veil is not possible, even after Zia’s death, but how a woman wears it can express her attitudes towards religion, class, interactions between men and women and her own sexual awareness. If a woman’s head is covered, then she is presumed to be signaling virtue and purity, even if she has stepped into the public space. A Pakistani woman’s foray into the “man’s world” of productive labour can be overlooked by patriarchal forces if she keeps her head covered by her dupatta. The head covering hints at a woman’s “femininity” and her chastity, which in turn could potentially save her from unjustified attacks from unrelated men while traversing the public domain. Not only does the covering of one’s head signal chastity, it also hints at class differences. Mumtaz and Shaheed have shown, for example, that “the covering of one’s head in Pakistan, which started as a measure of protection against the sun, became a sign of servility. Hence, even today in rural areas men as well as women cover their heads in front of strangers, whether male or female, particularly if these latter belong to a richer and more powerful social group” (Mumtaz and Shaheed 78). The veil, then, in all its myriad forms, becomes a complex system of interrelated symbols, a complexity that foregrounds the deep-rooted misogyny of the socio-political system that continues to use the Islamic principles of gender segregation to justify socio-legal reforms like the Hadood Ordinances in Pakistan. Some amendments to the Family Law Ordinance were introduced by Pervez Musharraf’s government in 2002 and 2008 (Patel 242), granting more power to Family Law courts to adjudicate cases between spouses, and the Zina

Ordinances of 1979 have been amended in 2006 (Patel xv), but women continue to be victimized on the bases of traditional (tribal and “cultural”) laws and customs, enshrined in the Pakistani constitution by Zia, all of which are based on the “misinterpretation and misapplication of the [...] principles of Islam” (Patel xv). Even though Pakistani activists continue to fight the customary laws and traditions, vehemently questioning the victimization of women, they have failed to address the inherent belief that women are to be segregated from men due to their intrinsic (dangerous) sexuality.

PTV’s line-up shifted slightly after Zia’s death (August 1988), and during Benazir Bhutto’s first term (1989-1991). Most of the various decrees censoring PTV programming were repealed, and “women were granted greater visibility” (Hussain “Television” 40). As far as thematic exploration was concerned, after Zia’s death, “the majority of plays continued to mete out stereotypes, [but] some plays explored complex issues concerning women” (Hussain “Television” 40) one of which was *Neelay Haath*. With relative freedom, PTV plays continued to progress both in theme and in content. *Neelay Haath* remains one of the few plays that have “more stark poignancy and realism rooted in the Pakistani experience” (Moheyuddin) than other plays ostensibly about women’s issues on PTV.

### 5.6 *Neelay Haath*: Class, Gender, Incarceration

First broadcast in the May-July 1989 season, *Neelay Haath* portrays a young, somewhat idealistic, feminist activist, Nabila Noman, who is arrested for political agitation and jailed for almost three months. During her incarceration, the upper-middle-class activist comes in contact with the “real” women of Pakistan, learning firsthand the true meaning of women’s oppression. According to Hussain, “most of the episodes were

based on real life incidents, and they centered around the different kinds of violence that women are subjected to in Pakistan” (40). The drama serial traces Nabila’s development from an idealist who takes part in public protests against women’s oppression, to one who begins to direct her energies towards social and legal reform, taking on specific problems and issues, after her release from jail. The serial traces the impact of the Islamization policies of the Zia regime on lived realities of women, portraying women incarcerated under the Hadood Ordinances, as well as portraying the impact of particular social customs on women’s lives. The overarching conceit of the serial is its claim to historical and social realism,<sup>148</sup> and the portrayal of these women’s stories on PTV was treated by television reviewers like Moheyuddin as “realistic images of human misery being perpetuated by disgraceful social, political and economic systems inherited from our past” (Moheyuddin). It was seen as a serial that exposes “a series of horrid secrets existing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (Moheyuddin). The serial was clearly designed to project images of feminism on television, and was written to convey a specific message: upper-class women who take up feminism, are distanced from the lived realities of the poor, the lower class women, due to which, the feminist movement in Pakistan has made little headway. The divisiveness of class and economic status is reminiscent of the divisions evident in *Mass Transit*, where Safina is separated from her co-inhabitants by multiple factors including class and education. The serial, through its portrayal of Nabila’s steep

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<sup>148</sup> In her article “Pakistani Theatre at Home and Abroad: A Critical Manifesto for a Feminist Homecoming” Fawzia Afzal-Khan shows that Pakistani performers and artists are not interested in the different, experimental forms of theatre favoured by artists and performers in the West, mainly because Pakistani audiences expect, even demand a cathartic experience based on realistic depictions of social and political issues (187).

learning curve with regards to poor women's lived realities, suggests that the women's movement in Pakistan needs to focus its energies on socio-political reform, and on legal reform, in order to gain equality for women, reform that can be possible only if educated upper-class women actively help, and speak-out for, the lower-class women. What shape that reform will take, however, depends largely on the politics of the mainly upper-class feminists. The issue of purdah is invariably pushed to the side-lines in favor of the more pressing demands for social and legal justice. Even though all the jailed women in the serial wear the dupatta and the chador, and use it to signal their emotions (I will discuss this in detail shortly) and even their rebellion, the "chador aur chardewari" ideology underlining the different social interactions depicted in the serial is left completely unchallenged. Thus, the serial establishes an effective critique of the patriarchal customs that sanction violence against women, but does not challenge the ideology behind gender segregation. In my reading of the different women's stories portrayed in the serial, I will show that it is the basic assumptions behind the veiling and segregation system (that women are intrinsically inferior and/ or dangerous, and thus, must be protected/ hidden) that allow injustice and abuse of women to continue unchecked. The play hints towards Zia's "chador aur chardewari" directives near the end of the serial, portraying women protesting against it, but does not question the veiling system directly. The segregation system itself does not take center stage in the episodes, but none of the women on screen appear unveiled, and all the women characters use their veils to convey specific meanings—from rebellion (by letting their dupattas fall from their heads) to submissiveness (by covering their heads in front of an authoritative figure, regardless of gender).

The serial is based on Nadeem's play "Barri [acquittal]", written at the express request of Madiha Gauhar, who also stars as Nabila Noman in the PTV drama serial. The play was first performed at the Goethe Institute, Lahore, under the direction of Madiha Gauhar, in March 1987 (Nadeem 52). In his introduction to the translation of "Barri", Nadeem asserts that "it wasn't easy for [him] to get a feel for the plight of women under a fundamentalist military dictatorship but [his] own experience as a political prisoner<sup>149</sup> came in handy" (51). For Nadeem, *Neelay Haath* "remains the boldest television serial on the theme of women's rights to be telecast by the network" (52), one that was popular and "drew its viewers from all sections of society, both rural and urban" (Hussain "Television" 40). According to Hussain, the serial received mixed reviews at its telecast. Most upper class women accused the writer "of thematic and situational over-exaggeration" (Hussain "Television" 40) while rural and lower middle class women "identified with both the class of women represented in the series and with the nature of problems depicted on screen" (Hussain "Television" 40).

The serial opens with Nabila in her room, surrounded by friends (two of whom do not wear the dupatta) who are working on placards protesting the oppression of women. Nabila herself wears a brightly coloured chador-style dupatta. When the girls begin to map out the logistics of their protest march, they ask how they can actually hide the placards they are working so hard to make. Nabila gets up, asks "aakhir yeh chaderain kab kaam aaengi [when will these chadors be of use to us?]" and proceeds to demonstrate

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<sup>149</sup> Nadeem was jailed for one year during Zia's reign, for political agitation against the military dictatorship and for demanding the restoration of democracy after which he lived "in exile" in England, returning to Pakistan in 1987.

by hiding a rolled up placard under the folds of her dupatta, which is slung over her shoulder casually, a clear indication of Nabila's disdain for the chador itself. The fact that she wears it, and the fact that she views it as a convenient accessory to her plans for the protest march, highlights the paradoxical relationship women have with the injunction to veil. In as much as they may protest against it (Nabila claims that the chador is of little use to her) women continue to not only wear the veil, but to use it for their own ends.

The girls' activities are clearly disliked by Nabila's family, her parents and her brother,<sup>150</sup> who warn her of serious consequences for taking part in demonstrations against the government. Before Nabila can defend herself, police walk in and arrest her. She is first taken to a holding cell, where she is allowed to keep a suitcase full of things brought by her mother. Here she meets Zulekha, a veteran of the system, who tells her to ask for her help if she needs anything.

The next scene shows Nabila reading Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, a book which is confiscated by the female warden, who assumes that the book has something to do with "sex". Nabila is told that good girls from good families should not read "such books". Nabila's feeble protest that the book is about women's oppression is left unheeded, and Nabila is asked to keep herself in check, an episode that highlights the significant differences in class, education and awareness levels among women in the

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<sup>150</sup> The roles of Nabila's brother and of her fiancé are subverted in an intriguing manner within the serial. The brother, for example, goes from violently objecting to Nabila's activism to being financially harmed by her incarceration (when his business partner and clients refuse to work with him due to his relationship with Nabila) to ultimately benefitting from her political success under the new democratic government. Nabila's fiancé, on the other hand, tries to support her activism verbally, but sells her out in order to keep his own job. Both men could have been her male protectors, but neither succeeds and Nabila ultimately fights her battles on her own terms.

prison system as well as the complicated power dynamics between the jailors and the jailed. Nabila clearly belongs to the educated upper-class elite, and is treated by the jailors (women who most often than not belong to the lower classes) with a mixture of deference tempered by a desire to demonstrate their own power over her during her incarceration. The camera's shifting focus—from a close-up of Nabila's book to a slow pan out to show Nabila lounging on a cot in her holding cell—also highlights Nabila's brand of feminism. She is closely aligned with academic feminism, and that too of the "Western" type. As Afiya Zia points out, due to General Zia's targeting of Pakistani women, the only tool for analyzing women in Pakistan is "faith-based politics and a woman's acceptance or resistance to expressions of this politics" (31). This definition of feminist politics, then, pits feminists against one another, with only two possible political frameworks to choose from: (a) secular, or Western feminism that is assumed to reject religion, tradition and culture, and (b) Islamic or faith-based feminism that demands women's rights, but within the Islamic framework, rejecting Western feminism as alien and contradictory to Islamic feminism. The warden's rejection of *The Second Sex*, and her assertion that "good girls" do not read such books, can thus, be read as a rejection of Nabila's Westernization, and of her position of privilege, one that keeps Nabila insulated from the lived realities of the working-class women of Pakistan. The rejection is also the warden's (unwitting) expression of her lack of knowledge, or awareness about, feminism. Spivak, in her essay "Diasporas Old and New" writes that "elite, upwardly mobile (generally academic) women of the new diasporas<sup>151</sup> join hands with similar women in

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<sup>151</sup> Spivak distinguishes between old and new diasporas in her essay "Diasporas Old and New" and shows

the so-called developing world to celebrate a new global or private ‘culture’, often in the name of the underclass” (250). The camera’s focus on *The Second Sex* places Nabila in the ranks of these “upwardly mobile” women at the onset of her incarceration, establishing her in a class above those she will meet in the course of her jail-term.

Nabila begins her incarceration haughtily, demanding special treatment by the jailors, well aware of the differences between herself (a political prisoner) and her fellow inmates (presumed to be criminals) and almost reveling in those differences. It is only after she is moved into the jail itself that she begins to realize that “crime” in Pakistan is gendered.

The veiling and segregation system, as well as the injunction to veil a woman’s body remains peripheral to the portrayal of women’s issues in *Neelay Haath*. The injunction for gender segregation, however, pervades the portrayal of the jail, and also shapes the interactions of the women with each other. As Nabila’s case is registered at the police station in the first episode, for example, the officers are all men, but Nabila is searched and questioned by women officers. There are no men on the staff in the women’s jail, and the women prisoners are questioned rigorously about their relationships with the men who come to visit them during their incarceration. One of the first scenes filmed inside the jail shows the female warden asking a woman inmate about her relationship with two men who have requested to visit her. The prisoner replies that

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that old diasporas were created by the arrival of refugees, indentured labourers in the privileged West, while new diasporas are formed by economically fueled migrations of the middle-classes from the East to the West, looking for better education and employment opportunities.



one is her husband, and the other her son. The warden then tells her that her “son” had proclaimed himself to be her brother-in-law (husband’s brother). The prisoner’s protests that her brother-in-law was son-like (she had raised him as her own son) are left unheeded, and she is allowed to meet only her husband, an episode that highlights not only the power wielded by the jailors, but also the laws of segregation that govern the jail’s policies. Even as criminals, women have to be protected from the advances of “na-mahram [unrelated]” men!

Nabila meets a number of women jailed under Zia-ul-Haq’s (who remains unnamed in the serial) Hadood Ordinances. Her fellow inmates include Sakina,<sup>152</sup> who is raped by the landowner who owns the farm that is rented and cultivated by her husband. When she claims rape, the landowner accuses her of robbery, and she is arrested. Her husband and mother-in-law ask her to withdraw her charge of rape, telling her that if she is silent about the rape, her robbery charges will be dropped and she will be free to return home. When she refuses, she is indicted for robbery. Her vocal protests and her strong personality inspire Nabila to resist the pleas of her own family, who beg her to sign papers renouncing all political activities in order to secure her own release. Sakina becomes Nabila’s source of strength over the course of her incarceration, and also becomes her guide, teaching her how to survive in jail. It is through Sakina that Nabila

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<sup>152</sup> The following stories of women’s crimes are all loosely based on actual cases, widely reported in newspapers and critiqued by feminist lawyers and activists in public forums. As each woman recounts her story in the drama serial, it is important to remember that the viewing audience of 1989 would have most of these cases fresh in memory and would recognize the account as historically accurate. The serial’s title sequence is a montage of pictures and stills from popular newspapers showing WAF protesters and other women being arrested during protest marches, women being shuttled between courts and jail-cells, victimized by the Pakistani state. The montage reminds viewers every week about the serial’s political and historical focus.

hears some women's stories, and learns to empathize with her fellow inmates, rather than viewing them as debased criminals.

Nabila meets Zainab next. Her entrance is the most dramatic one in the twenty-two episode drama serial. She literally explodes onto the screen, rushing into Nabila's arms while attempting to escape the wardens, her dupatta trailing behind her. Not knowing who she is, Nabila hands her over to the wardens, holding on to her own dupatta almost as an afterthought, clearly trying desperately to figure out who Zainab is. The wardens are commanded to monitor Zainab's every move, even to monitor her dreams. Nabila later learns that Zainab is kept in the "Mental Ward" due to her attacks of hysteria. She sneaks into the mental ward, and befriends Zainab, from whom she then learns that she was married to an older, abusive man against her wishes, with whom she had two daughters. He tries to marry another woman, hoping to have sons with her. Zainab refuses to give him her permission to marry again. According to Section 6 of the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961, a husband cannot marry again until he has permission from his first wife and has to submit a written application to the arbitration council outlining the reasons for multiple marriages (Patel 153). Zainab's husband, however, persists in his plans even though Zainab refuses to give him verbal or written permission, and she runs away from home, planning to commit suicide, having nowhere else to go. She jumps into a river with her daughters, but she herself is dragged out against her will. Both her daughters drown, and she is arrested for their murder.

The veil—in its manifestation in the serial as dupatta and chador—marks class differences throughout the serial. Where Sakina keeps her head covered through most of the serial's episodes (which is a sign of both—her religiosity and her lower class), both

Nabila and Zainab appear with their heads uncovered, their dupattas flung over their shoulders almost as an afterthought. During the flashback scenes depicting Zainab's story, Zainab herself appears as an innocent young girl, strolling through a garden, surrounded by flowers, with no dupatta in sight. She dons the veil as a married woman, but the dupatta remains on her shoulder, and she needs to be reminded by her husband to cover her hair. The veil, then, becomes the first signal of class differences, placing Zainab in a class slightly superior to her husband's.

Nabila then hears Zulekha's story, the woman she had first met in the holding cell. Zulekha reveals that she had been roped into smuggling drugs in and out of the country, by her husband. When she was caught, he did not try to help her, and let her take the fall. When the courts convict her of smuggling drugs, her husband sends her divorce papers, which lead to Zulekha's subsequent breakdown, during which she rails against the patriarchal system that allows the real criminal to escape incarceration. Again, both Zulekha and Nabila leave their heads uncovered through the majority of their scenes. Both women are educated women, belonging to the middle (Zulekha) and upper-middle (Nabila) classes, which shows that women from the upper classes wear the veil in deference to social norms, preferring to leave their heads uncovered, but still adopting the dupatta to drape their bodies, if not their heads. In Zulekha's flashback scenes, Zulekha carries expensive luggage through airport customs, her "beauty case" filled with imported lipstick and makeup brands, which she uses to bribe customs officials, and to carry her husband's drug cache (the drugs are hidden in secret compartments specially built into the lipsticks and compacts). Nabila has to be reminded to cover her head in the presence of authoritative figures while in jail, whether male or female, which in turn highlights the

power struggle between Nabila and her jailors. Even though Nabila is technically under her jailors' power while in jail, she uses her veil (by refusing to, or conveniently forgetting to, cover her head) to express her higher class position.

The Haddod Ordinances are first mentioned during Amna's account of her "crime". She marries a man from a different village, against her family's express wishes. Interestingly, the couple falls in love after an incident involving Amna's veil. She is returning from a friend's wedding celebrations when Murad's bicycle veers off course, throwing mud onto Amna's dupatta and forcing her to unveil her face (she drops the corner of the dupatta covering her face in order to wipe off the mud). Murad seeks her out subsequently to replace her soiled dupatta and both fall in love. The literalization of a trope involving the dupatta and/or the chador in this serial, at this specific point in the narrative is significant. The "soiled dupatta" signals soiled honour, and can also refer to rape—a man is said to have "soiled" a family's honour by soiling a woman's dupatta: the Urdu idiom for rape is "uskay dupattay pay daagh hai [her dupatta has a spot on it]". The fact that Murad (unintentionally) throws mud onto Amna's dupatta, and then seeks her out to replace it, which then leads to a love affair vehemently opposed by Amna's family can be read as symbolic of sexual relations. The symbolism of the soiled dupatta, here, speaks to the overarching metaphoric use of the veil within the drama serial. The serial makes use of the veil as an important marker of both social and sexual difference, but fails to make an effective critique of the veil as a symbol of both: blanket oppression of women at some points (as in the first half of Kermani's music video) as well as a marker of sexual difference. By using the veil as a metaphor, as a symbol, the serial undermines its own potential ability to critique the "chador aur chardewari" system.

When Amna's family refuses to consent to the match, the couple elopes. The family then has the couple arrested for adultery, and both are jailed under the Hadood Ordinance,<sup>153</sup> pending further investigation of the accusation. Nabila uses her connections in the legal community to secure Amna's release. Amna is then forcefully released into the custody of her parents, the very people responsible for her arrest. At home with her parents, Amna is shot, execution-style by her brother. Here, Nabila's good intentions are coloured by her exalted economic and class status. Believing that a good lawyer is all that Amna needs, Nabila fails to understand the complexity of the socio-legal system that perpetrated Amna's victimization in the first place. Nabila's incarceration, then, can just as easily be read as her initiation into the complexities of the institutional misogyny prevalent in Pakistan as well as the complex interplay between institutional power and familial power. Amna is victimized by both while Nabila uses her familial power to (attempt to) question, even challenge institutional power over her own, and her fellow inmates' lives. Part of Nabila's "education" through her incarceration in the serial is to distinguish between the sources of power, and to learn to recognize that class regulates the impact of institutional and familial power on a Pakistani woman's life.

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<sup>153</sup> Rahsida Patel's discussion of the Family Laws' Ordinance of 1961 shows that the registration of marriages was made compulsory to prove that a marriage had actually taken place. According to Patel, "the change in the law has not really altered the situation because the system for registration of marriages is defective" (114) and that after the promulgation of the 1979 Hadood Ordinances, a lack of a Nikahnama (marriage certificate) proving legal marriage resulted in the charge of zina, or adultery (114).

Sudhi's re-telling of her story addresses the issue of "honour killings" or more specifically, that of *karo kari*.<sup>154</sup> Sudhi, along with her adolescent daughter Rano, moves back to her brother's village after her husband's death due to her in-laws' fights over the distribution of her husband's property. Once at her brother's house, Sudhi learns that an old family feud has been revived, and that multiple members of both families have been murdered. Rano is told of the custom of *karo kari*, in which, after murdering a man from the rival family, the murderer returns home, takes a young girl of his own family, murders her, and then places their bodies together in compromising situations to escape the murder penalty. Honour killings result in a punishment of only three months in jail, while the legal punishment for murder in cold-blood is death by hanging.<sup>155</sup> Within days, Anwar, Sudhi's nephew, murders a man from his rival family, and returns home to murder Rano, in spite of Sudhi's protests. On Anwar's release from jail, Sudhi is asked to forgive Anwar by his family. Instead of forgiving him, she pulls out a gun, and murders him, claiming that she too, has committed an honour killing. Of course, since the honour killing leniency is not extended to women, Sudhi is jailed for murder.

The next mention of the effect of the Haddood Ordinances on women comes in the form of Parveen's story, who is arrested under the charge of adultery, and sentenced to death by stoning (*sansar*). Parveen is divorced by her husband, who proclaims "talaq

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<sup>154</sup> According to Rashida Patel, "karo kari traditionally means the right of the community or a close relative—husband, father or brother—to kill the female offender and her male paramour for an illicit sexual relationship" (74). This custom is consistently misused "to murder persons for ulterior motives" (Patel 74).

<sup>155</sup> Rashida Patel shows that in Pakistani Law, there is no specific statute that condones honour killing, but a plethora of case law supports the claim that violation of male honour constitutes grave and mitigating circumstances, that would allow the court to award a reduced sentence to the male murderer (66).

[divorce]” three times verbally, a practice that is accepted as a binding form of divorce amongst most South Asian Muslims. Parveen returns home, begins work in a garment factory and marries again. Her ex-husband, however, files charges of adultery, claiming that Parveen is still legally married to him, which automatically makes her second marriage illegal. Since the verbal divorce was never registered legally, police arrest Parveen for adultery. Nabila uses her connections again to help get a “stay” for the sentence of “sansar” (stoning) for Parveen. Shahnaz Khan has shown that the “hadd punishments of stoning to death for illicit sexual activity” (84) has been used to sentence a disproportionate amount of women over men, a “disparity in the sentencing of women [...that] speaks to the deep gender bias in the law and the larger social system within which it operates” (84). Even though Khan does not go so far as to suggest that the veiling system sanctions this misogyny, (which was constitutionalized under Zia) she does gesture towards the safety provided by families within the confines of a family home in exchange for submission to family demands “regarding their [women’s] education, employment, and marriage choices” (86). I propose that this segregation—between the public and the private—is in itself a manifestation of the veiling and segregation system, that the public is consistently constructed as a dangerous, harmful place only for the unveiled (and hence un-chaste) woman, and that women’s honour is safe only within the confines of the family home. Anytime a woman resists, she is punished severely, punishments that are highlighted by Nadeem’s serial.

Nabila is not the only woman belonging to the upper-classes who is jailed for political agitation. While trying to lead a revolution in jail—she begins to teach her fellow inmates about their rights—Nabila is sent to solitary confinement, during which

she is allowed 15 minutes of exercise. There she meets Sajida, who is kept in solitary confinement on the charge of terrorism. Sajida is also portrayed as belonging to the middle-classes, sporting short-hair and a carelessly handled dupatta. All four women—Nabila, Zainab, Zulekha and Sajida—are portrayed as vocal, determined, and well-aware of their rights as women, but are still portrayed as victims of the state machinery.

According to Sajida, her political career began with her brother's support, during student riots protesting the dictatorship, demanding the restoration of democracy. The siblings participated in political protests but did so in secret, without their parents' knowledge of their activities. Even after her marriage and the birth of her son, she continues her political activities with her brother's support—without her husband's approval—distributing pamphlets and placards and educating illiterate slum-dwellers about their legal and political rights, as well as the government's obligations towards its citizens. She is arrested from her home, on the charge of terrorism, and a false case of bomb-making is registered against her. One scene seems to suggest custodial rape and/or torture by her male interrogators, but the scene changes too quickly to allow viewers to make a full assessment of what is actually happening.

Nabila also hears a baby crying while in the solitary cell, and bribes the warden with her engagement ring (I will pick up this moment for discussion shortly), just so that she may visit the mother. Jamila welcomes her, and when asked, tells Nabila that her husband was politically active, attempting to unionize a car factory. He was under constant threat, warned by fellow workers that the factory owners would have him murdered rather than allow a union to exist. He does not listen to the warnings and tries to initiate a workers' strike to demand better working conditions. He is burnt to death by



the factory owner's men, and upon learning of her husband's murder, Jamila takes revenge by pretending to be a servant, walking into the factory owner's bedroom and setting his bed on fire, with him in it. She is arrested for murder, and sentenced to death, but because she is pregnant, she is kept on death row, until such time as her son can be safely weaned. Since she clearly belongs to the working class, she keeps her head covered in Nabila's presence, even during her solitary confinement, a portrayal that constructs the dupatta and its use as more than just a piece of fabric. The dupatta is consistently used to signal a woman's socio-economic status, since no other markers of class can be depicted while the women remain incarcerated, in the interests of realism on TV.

Her cell-mates' hunger strike secures Nabila's release from solitary confinement as well as gains the attention of the media who begin to demand jail reform. The government appoints a "jail examination committee" whose purpose is to visit the jail, examine the conditions in which the women prisoners are kept and submit recommendations to the government. Before the committee can arrive, however, the superintendant of the jail pretends to accept Nabila's list of demands. To Nabila and her friends, however, the superintendant's acceptance of their demands becomes a victory that is celebrated in their jail cell with songs and general merriment. I read Nabila's naiveté—her willingness to trust the jailor's promises—as a manifestation of her own sheltered upbringing. Since she belongs to the upper-middle class, she has had little exposure to the working-classes and their life-styles, living most of her adult life in a sheltered bubble comprised of her own restricted social circle, which explains why she mis-reads the jail superintendant's verbal promises, trusting him when she should not

have. Since Nabila herself believes the jailor, Sakina and her fellow inmates believe him as well, trusting Nabila's "educated" instincts over their own. During the ensuing celebrations in the cell, the women admit to Nabila that they are afraid of being released from jail, for the world outside the four walls is far more dangerous for them. The jail is comfortable, the abuse predictable, the rules clear. The jail cell, for them, becomes a zenana-type space, one where they can even be productive, working long hours in a sewing factory (even though they do not get paid for their labour), and one where they are fed, clothed and abuse kept to the minimum.

Afraid of the political mess created by Nabila's protest and rebellion, the jailors transfer most of Nabila's friends to different jails across the country, and release Nabila to her family, just before the government's examination committee arrives. Once outside, she tries to return to her job as a college professor and learns that she will have to sign a bond claiming that she will not take part in any political activities. Nabila refuses to sign, and steps up her political activism, channeling her energies into focusing on her friends' cases. She travels to her incarcerated friends' villages, asking family members to tell the truth so that the new evidence may help lawyers re-open cases. By securing new witnesses, by getting men to speak up, Nabila secures the release of most of her friends, and sets new legal precedents for subsequent cases. She also becomes politically vocal, using her own celebratory status as an activist to endorse particular political candidates in the federal elections. Her support of the political candidate (presumably Benazir Bhutto) helps the candidate win the elections, and across the country, women are released from

jail.<sup>156</sup> Two hundred and sixty women are released from the jail in which Nabila was incarcerated. Her visit to the jail, however, makes Nabila realize that even though most women have been released, the laws themselves, and the society at large, haven't changed. Only the government has changed, which means that even though the old cases have been dismissed, a hundred and forty new ones have been added. The play ends with Nabila's legal adoption of Jamila's son. Nabila had parted with her engagement ring in order to gain access to Jamila's solitary jail-cell, an act that foreshadows her breaking off of her engagement after her release from jail. Contrary to previous portrayals of women in PTV plays, Nabila meets her fiancé in a public restaurant un-chaperoned, and breaks off her engagement with him on the grounds that her life choices (her political activism) do not have room for a husband and children, a radical statement in the 1980's Pakistani context. Not only does Nabila refuse to marry, she adopts Jamila's son legally after her release from jail (her release came too late to save Jamila), and promises to raise him alone, as a "good human being" unlike the misogynistic (and hence weak) men she has dealt with in the Pakistani political system as a feminist activist. The serial ends with a shot of the sun peaking through dense clouds, an image of hope and regeneration.

### 5.7 Portrayal of the Veil and the construction of the *Zenana* in *Neelay Haath*

Nadeem seems to be constructing the jail itself in *Neelay Haath* as a new kind of *zenana*, one that is somehow safer, more comfortable than the women prisoners' own

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<sup>156</sup> Anita Weiss shows, in her essay "Benazir Bhutto and the Women's Movement in Pakistan" that one of the first acts as prime minister by Benazir Bhutto was to release all women prisoners from jail (439) which leads me to reiterate that the drama serial presented fictionalized versions of historical, politically significant moments in Pakistani feminism.

homes. During a long discussion, after the jailors' pretense at accepting the "demands" of the jailed women for better treatment, Sudhi, Rano's mother, wonders what she will actually do if she is ever released from jail. Both Sakina and Sudhi talk about how they have no "home" to return to, for their homes are filled with people who are responsible for their incarceration. The ensuing discussion compares the world outside the jail to that constructed within the high walls of the jail itself, and Sudhi asserts that the abuse inside the jail is more tolerable because it is at the hands of strangers, not family members. For Sakina, the jail is more comfortable because it is free of taunts and abuse by strange men of the streets, and because she is surrounded by women, instead of being left unprotected at the mercy of strange men. It is that assertion, and the female-only setting of the jail itself that constructs the jail-cell as a zenana-like space, one that is confined and restrictive, but simultaneously vibrant and protective. Like a zenana, the jail-cell, in this construction, protects women from the abuses perpetrated in the name of honour and custom, a strange inversion of the usual purposes of a jailing system. For Sudhi and Sakina, in jail, nothing more is expected from them than hard labour and obedience, in return for which they get shelter and relative peace. The same logic is used to justify the construction of zenana-like spaces in homes. According to Sakina, the outside world is more dangerous, full of pitfalls that are hidden under the guise of loving family support. Nabila, on the other hand, sees the women's fear of the "outside world" as a manifestation of their internalization of social embargos and taboos. She tells the women that they have the power within themselves to question their own subjugation to, quite literally, break down the walls of their own imprisonment. In her view, women of rural Pakistan have the power to rebel, to demand emancipation, but do not do so because they

allow cultural traditions to subjugate them. I read this conversation, and Nabila's contribution to it, as her reiteration of a specific brand of liberal feminism—one that is highlighted in the first episode of the serial through the camera's focus on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This seemingly uncritical application of Liberal feminism to Pakistan's location undermines the serial's overarching message in favor of Pakistani women's emancipation from cultural oppression. Without addressing the deep-rooted conviction that women are physically—and at times morally—inferior to men, which, in turn, is used to justify the construction of zenanas and zenana-like spaces, the women's movement in Pakistan continues to face obstacles. The serial, thus, uses the veil, and the zenana, symbolically to challenge patriarchal oppression of women in Pakistan, but does not take up the problematic of the veil politically. Instead, the serial presents the zenana as a protective, comforting—albeit restrictive—space, one that can be a productive space for women's social interactions, as long as women do not allow it to be used against them.<sup>157</sup>

The incarcerated women's use of the dupattas that are a part of their jail uniforms speaks volumes about their own class and socio-economic status. Nabila, even in prison, does not cover her head, and needs to be told to do so as a sign of respect for those in authority. Most women belonging to villages, being punished for crimes under the Hadood Ordinances cover their heads, no matter who is in front of them. Only Zulekha, Zainab and Sajida, the three educated and middle-class women, leave their heads uncovered, both in the flashback scenes as well as in jail. This particular portrayal of

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<sup>157</sup> This particular reading of the zenana is reminiscent of my discussion of Sheema Kermani's performance of Fahmida Riaz's poem, in my first chapter.

women's use of their veils to depict emotions foregrounds my reading of the veiling system as a particularly complex web of socio-economic and cultural symbols, one that is consistently used by women to challenge and subvert patriarchy but also to comply with the rules of segregation to win specific concessions. Not only is the veil a symbol of gender segregation, the way it is worn signals class distinctions while simultaneously acting as a shield between women and patriarchal forces that could subjugate them. As I have noted already, the dupatta is used by the women to signal chastity and purity (even if it is carelessly flung over one shoulder) and the throwing off of the dupatta signals a woman's defiance of, and rebellion against, gender segregation and codified forms of behavior expected of them from an internalized sense of social expectations. Where women have learnt to talk back, their first sign of irreverence, or of rebellion, seems to be the rejection of the veil on their heads. But that rebellion goes unvocalized—the throwing off of veils, like Bi Amma's unveiling discussed in my first chapter, has the potential of being read as a political move, but in the urban vs. rural dynamic of the jail-cell in *Neelay Haath*, the non-covering of the head on the part of Nabila, Zulekha and Sajida is in keeping with the realist conceit of the serial (showing a liberated, vocal, urbanized woman demurely covering her head would have been viewed as an out-of-character act). Here, the veil becomes an extension of the body, a system of symbols and references that define the sexual un/availability of women, as well as the woman's acceptance of, and conformity to, socio-religious demands for veiling and gender segregation.

*Neelay Haath* presents multiple stories, all of which address specific social and cultural laws and codes that subjugate women. The scene where Sudhi and Sakina reflect on the fates awaiting them outside the jail's walls hints at the troubled fate of women who

do choose to rebel against social and cultural traditions. Nabila consistently encourages women to “fight back” but does not fully realize the consequences of that rebellion. The scene itself is pivotal within the play, as it is the last time she has a conversation with her fellow inmates. In the next scene, Nabila is called into her jailor’s office and told that she has been released to her family. Her own homecoming is significantly different from the one imagined by Sudhi and Sakina—she is welcomed, pampered, and celebrated by her friends and family for having “survived” the rigours of jail. Her mother even begins to encourage her political activities. Nabila does not meet her fellow inmates again. Since Nabila is the person who helps secure releases for her friends in jail, one begins to wonder if the experience in jail had been enough to help her understand the underlying class and economic currents of the social “ills” she is so intent on fighting. Nabila remains committed to liberal feminism, which, in turn, blinds her to the class and social restrictions that dominate the women’s interactions with each other, even in jail. Subsequent episodes of the serial gloss over the ultimate fate of the women Nabila helps to release from jail—the serial only highlights the social, legal and cultural norms that continue to incarcerate women, in spite of significant legal changes. The serial also neglects to confront the segregation system directly, a system that continues to define and confine women’s interactions with men, as well as with other women in Pakistan. The deep-rooted belief in women’s inferiority, and the belief that women are indeed dispensable, as well as the need to constantly police women’s behavior both inside and outside the home is the underlying assumption behind the socio-legal system that continues to view women as less valuable than men. In as much as *Neelay Haath* brings women’s subjugation in Pakistan to the forefront, its limited portrayal of women’s

agency fails to critique the very assumptions that are the foundations of Pakistan's socio-legal attitude towards women.

### 5.8 “The Burqa is not a cover-up”: The Controversy surrounding “Burqavaganza”

*Neelay Haath* is a sustained, critical, feminist engagement with the legal legacy of Zia's misogynistic Islamization, but it does not engage directly with the socio-religious undergirdings of those legal changes—the serial allows the use of the veil as a tool of negotiation and compromise in a restricted, zenana-like space where women have little agency, but it does not challenge, nor critique the “chador aur chardewari” injunction. Shahid Nadeem's theatrical farce “Burqavaganza” (2007) takes up the issue of the veil itself, and uses the “burqa” as a metaphor for social and institutional cover-ups. Where the genre of *Neelay Haath* is realism, “Burqavaganza” is a comic farce, relying heavily on satire and irony to critique institutional corruption. The media's response to the play's use of the burqa as a metaphor, however, fails to see the burqa as the metaphor for masking of institutional corruption that Nadeem had intended, and, instead, attacks “Burqavaganza” for deliberately attacking a “sacred” institution: veiling as enjoined by Islam. In both uses of the burqa—as a metaphor for masks, and the hyper-politicized defense of the garment as a Muslim woman's pride—the veiling and segregation system itself, once again, is left unchallenged. Instead, Nadeem defends his metaphorization in terms of artistic license, and proclaims that he respects the veil itself as an institution, which I read as a political compromise on his part, to get his play staged. For a self-proclaimed feminist and activist for women's rights, his support of the veiling system



itself reads like pandering to the politically powerful religious right. While discussing the controversy surrounding the banning of the play, Fawzia Afzal-Khan notes that,

While the ban on *Burqavaganza* was never enacted, the fact that it was passed in April 2007 by a government under pressure from the mullah class, and the performance held up for several months, indicates the seriousness with which art and performance are treated by the Pakistani government and its allies as threats to the status quo, even as they are publicly reviled or looked down on as frivolous activities. (“Performative Interventions” 21)

Given the intense reaction to the satire, it is no surprise that the veiling and segregation system has been left unchallenged, even in performances that are distinctly “feminist”.

The play was first slated for a performance in February 2007, at the Alhamra, the government owned Lahore Arts Council (Ebrahim) but was moved to a privately owned theatre after a controversy over the play’s portrayal of the institution of purdah broke out in the media. Zofeen Ebrahim reports that the theatre company Ajoka (owned by Shahid Nadeem and Madiha Gauhar) did not receive a government notice banning the play, but, after “five Islamist MPs raised the issue in the Parliament” (Ebrahim), the Lahore Arts Council (Alhamra) refused to stage the play on its premises. The verbal ban on the play was pronounced by the Minister for Culture, G. G. Jamal, who had not seen the actual performance (Nadeem 284). Both Gauhar and Nadeem continue to defend the play’s portrayal of the burqa (and by extension the purdah system) as a metaphor for cover-ups and masks hiding specific evils of society. According to Nadeem, “the play should not be taken as making fun of *anyone’s beliefs* or *dress preferences* and the objective [of the play is] to enable people to consider contentious issues in a relaxed and light-hearted

manner” (Nadeem 284; my emphasis). The play itself is treated as a love story (Qamar), with the two star-crossed lovers being persecuted by different governmental institutions as well as Islamists and Taliban-like terrorists, all of whom appear on stage completely covered by different types of burqas, veils and face-coverings. The police constables, for example, wear a niqab-type covering over their faces to match their uniforms, the female commander of the burqa brigade wears a heavily embroidered burqa, the MP wears a tribal turban and a glittering burqa showcasing traditional embroidery, and Burqa-bin-Batin,<sup>158</sup> the larger than life leader of a terrorist organization wears an Arabic long dress and covers his face with a big scarf. In his introduction to the English translation of the play,<sup>159</sup> Nadeem asserts that the burqa, in contemporary Pakistan, has become a “symbol of [an] ultra-conservative ideology. It stands for the defiance of the West, denial of women’s rights and an extremist retrogressive political programme” (Nadeem 282). In satirizing the burqa, then, Nadeem is critiquing “discrimination against the girl-child, political double-standards, and violence perpetrated by both sides in the so-called War on Terror” (Nadeem 284-285).

The governmental ban on the play, and the debates over the play’s “blasphemous” portrayal of the Islamic veil, highlights the controversial nature of the veil itself in both contemporary Pakistan and global media. In a video uploaded to YouTube by *The New York Times* on June 21, 2010, entitled “Pakistan’s Burqa Drama” covering the

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<sup>158</sup> The name is a play on Osama bin Laden, and literally means burqa without character. The word *batin*, in Urdu, is the opposite of *zahir*, meaning revealed, or obvious. The name burqa-bin-batin implies multiple meanings, and is a play on revealing/concealing.

<sup>159</sup> Some selected plays by Shahid Nadeem were translated and published in the book *Selected Plays*, presumably for preservation and for North American consumption.

controversy surrounding the banning of the play, the leader of *Jamaat-i-Islami*'s<sup>160</sup> Women's Wing, Samia Kazi, who herself wears a burqa in public, asserts that the play's farcical representation of the burqa is "hurtful" to those who wear the burqa on a daily basis. When asked if she had actually seen the play itself, she admits that she had seen only some scenes from it, which was enough to lead her to protest the staging of the play. Both the producers of the play, and media stories covering the controversy, highlight the rising power of the religious right in Pakistan.

Fawzia Afzal-Khan discusses the Pakistani theatrical audience in her article "Pakistani Theatre at Home and Abroad: A Critical Manifesto for a Feminist Homecoming" where she draws clear distinctions between the historical development of theatre in Pakistan and that of theatre in the West. According to her, "[t]he deconstructive impulse behind most modernist and postmodernist 'avant-garde' performance work in the West does not interest theatre directors in Pakistan since the political, social and economic realities in the latter are so different" (187). Afzal-Khan has shown that Pakistan's theatre audiences expect theatre to inform, entertain and to represent reality on stage. She asserts that "because of the urgency of the political situation in Pakistan, the form most amenable to dramatizing urgent social concerns is naturalist realism" (186),<sup>161</sup> and thus, experimental theatrical productions are viewed with suspicion by the Pakistani

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<sup>160</sup> The *Jamaat-e-Islami* is one of the leading religious political parties of Pakistan, and is the most vocal advocate of the zenana and the burqa.

<sup>161</sup> Critical analysis of theatre and performance in Pakistan does not exist. Performing theatre, in itself, is a dangerous activity in the Pakistani context, and hence, each performance is fraught with controversy and a (shared) sense of urgency and danger. See Fawzia Afzal-Khan's book, *A Critical Stage: The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan* for a detailed discussion.

audiences, if not with outright opposition, as in the case of “Burqavaganza”. Theatrical performances in Pakistan, given their investment in political and social criticism, are consistently regarded as a challenge to the state and the establishment. Even those considered to be on the fringes of the arts and entertainment mainstream in Pakistan are taken seriously by the media and the political machinery.

The play’s depiction of the Islamic veil deliberately constructs it as a mask, which is reminiscent of my discussions of the veil’s portrayal in my earlier chapters. In this specific delineation, however, the playwright has attempted to divorce the burqa itself from its Islamic context as a fabric shroud designed to conceal feminine sexuality. Instead, Nadeem uses it “merely” to showcase the association of the Islamic veil with “*jihadist* and Taliban elements that are feared worldwide for their terror tactics” (Nadeem 282; original italics) which de-feminizes the veil significantly. If the veil/burqa/niqab only showcases terrorism, then Nadeem is literally pandering to the Western horror of the veiled Muslim body. Alia Al-Saji in her essay, “The Racialization of Muslim Veils” argues that the representations of veiled Muslim women in Western media provide the “foil or negative mirror” (877) in which Western conceptions of gender and identity can be reflected. She claims that images of veiled Muslim women permit the constitution of Western gender identity as free and liberated (877). She also shows that the images of the veiled and silenced Afghan women helped the Bush Administration justify the war against Afghanistan, the discourse constructing the war as an effort to liberate Muslim women from the tyranny of the Taliban (876). This construction silences the veiled Muslim woman, using her image as a mere reflection. I see Nadeem’s defense of his use of the burqa in a similar light. All the characters appearing on stage in “Burqavaganza”

veil their faces and bodies with diaphanous fabric shroud-like covers, the only clue to their identity lying in the fabric itself. Policemen on stage wear their uniform, but leave their faces hidden behind fabric matching the uniforms, a costume that instantaneously transforms the character into a representative of the entire institution. The commander of the female burqa brigade wears a designer burqa, while the minister representing the government wears a gaudy, glittering burqa, with a turban that is traditionally worn by grooms at their weddings. In as much as the Islamic burqa is designed to conceal and to cloak, in this manifestation, the burqa does anything but. The veil is transformed into a curtain that reveals not only the identity of its wearer (through the use of specific colours, fabrics and embroidery) but also reveals their class, socioeconomic status and gender. The only characters wearing “traditional” burqas (unadorned, black or white head-to-toes coverings) on stage are the vendors selling bangles and other accessories. With both genders wearing the burqa on stage, the playwright is simultaneously invoking the political rhetoric that made, and continues to make, the veil a socially compulsory form of attire for women in Pakistan, and the use of the burqa by men to escape capture at the hands of the police and army during political upheavals.<sup>162</sup> The complex, layered connotations of the wearing of the burqa are dramatized on stage, while the burqa itself is divorced from the Islamic injunction to veil a woman’s body.

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<sup>162</sup> I am referring here to specific moments in Pakistani history where men have used the fabric folds of the burqa to escape arrest. A recent example is (what is popularly called) the Laal Masjid (Red Mosque) incident. Under General Pervez Musharraf’s dictatorship, a jihadist group took over Islamabad’s Laal Masjid, prompting a siege of the mosque by Pakistan’s army. The besieged group included women and children. The chief cleric of the mosque (and the leader of the group) attempted to escape the mosque covered by a burqa, hoping to escape detection by accompanying women who had been allowed by the Pakistan Army to leave the besieged mosque unharmed. See the news report in *The Daily Times* entitled “People Resent Lal Masjid Cleric’s Attempt to Flee in a Burqa”.

Given the complex interplay between the veil and its wearer in both *Neelay Haath* and “Burqavaganza” the Islamic veil itself becomes more than just a symbol of oppression and suppression of Muslim women. In both *Neelay Haath* and *Burqavaganza*, the veil itself—in all its manifestations—is left unchallenged, even uncritiqued, highlighting the instinctive acceptance of the injunction to veil a woman’s body. The veil is elevated, instead, to a signal of a woman’s chastity, her purity and becomes a gesture towards gender segregation in *Neelay Haath*, and reduced to a symbol of Islamic terrorism and institutional corruption in “Burqavaganza”. In both performances, the fact that the belief in gender segregation, and women’s inherent inferiority, as symbolized by the veil, has led to significant obstacles to Pakistani women’s emancipation is left unexamined and uncritiqued. In both plays, social institutions, women’s own lack of self-awareness and political systems have instead, been blamed. Given the contexts of both texts,<sup>163</sup> however, it is important to note that they do important political work by foregrounding specific misogynistic socio-cultural institutions like the Haddood Ordinances and governmental corruption, in spite of the rising power of the religious right in the 1990’s and even in the early 2000’s. For the same reason—the rise of the religious right—it is also crucial that the veiling and gender segregation system is unpacked and then nuanced more thoroughly by feminists than has been done so far. The stakes of foregrounding the veil are high—as the controversy surrounding the staging of

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<sup>163</sup> *Neelay Haath* was broadcast immediately following General Zia’s death, at a time when the religious right had been granted political power in exchange for political legitimacy for Zia’s dictatorship. “Burqavaganza” was first performed during General Pervez Musharraf’s dictatorship, a decade during which Pakistan struggled to control the political and cultural power of terrorism networks engaged in an open civil-war with the Pakistani State.

“Burqavaganza” has illustrated—but the mere fact that the verbal ban on the play was never enacted shows that theatre and other forms of performance (music videos, television dramas) have the potential of doing the work, provided feminists forego the concessions they win by leaving the veil unchallenged.

## Conclusion

### Reflections on the Veil: Futures of the Portable Closet

“I felt extremely uncomfortable during my visit to the courts [in Pakistan]. The women there appeared divided into two categories: the lawyers who wore a white *shalwar-kameez* (loose pants and top), and the prisoners and their relatives, many of whom were veiled or had covered their head with a chador. I did not fit into any of these categories and was therefore stared at more than the other women, to the extent that the judge asked my research assistant (a lawyer who represented one of the women that I was interviewing) who I was... She replied that I was there to assist her. I vowed that, if I had to go to the courts again, I would certainly find a *burkha* (veil) to wear” (Shahnaz Khan 65).

Shahnaz Khan, a Canadian academic, in Pakistan to conduct research and to interview incarcerated women in the early 2000’s, finds herself craving the anonymity and the protection afforded to a woman’s body by the burqa—the portable closet. Perfectly capable of defending herself, confident in the protection afforded to her by virtue of class and economic (as well as transnational) privilege, Khan had not worn a chador or a burqa while attending the courts in Pakistan, and found herself “reduced” to her body, intensely aware of her “out-of-placeness” simply by men’s reactions to her presence. She did not belong, and needed a chador or a burqa in order to belong. Such is the power of the veiling and segregation system in Pakistan, where even though the veil is not officially required, it becomes a desired object by a woman, one that can (sometimes) be the only thing shielding a woman’s body, her honour, as well as the portable closet that allows and facilitates her access to spaces that may otherwise be closed to her. For Khan, the desire for the portable closet highlights the contextual framework within which she was working (transnational feminist, Pakistani, “native



informant” speaking to a Western audience) and the need to gain access to specific spaces, but it also underlines her awareness of her own vulnerability as a woman out-of-place in a very public space (the courts in Pakistan) that is clearly controlled by men.

In this dissertation, I have shown that the veil is far more than a garment that can be taken off or that can be put on at will. Khan’s vow to herself, that she will find a burqa to wear the next time she ventures near the Pakistani courts gestures towards the paradoxical nature of the burqa, and by extension the veil. Khan does not wish for a burqa because of an adherence to the religious injunction to veil, nor does she need one because it is required by law. As I have indicated already, she needs one because she believes that its folds will help her gain access to spaces like courts and jails, spaces she needed to enter to conduct her research into Pakistani women’s experiences of the jailing system. She is not just out-of-place because she does not belong to the usual categories of people visiting courts, but because she is an un-chaperoned woman, and one who signals her (unintentional) defiance of dress-code and behavior expected of a woman in a public space that is clearly controlled by men, by not donning the “acceptable” form of the veil. The fact that she is also a diasporic academic, an interrogator, an outsider, further complicates her relationship with both the burqa and the spaces that she needs to function within to conduct and complete her research. The burqa has the potential of allowing her to enter the spaces, to conduct her interviews (by making her body invisible), as well as the potential to cover-up her identity as a Canadian academic who could be viewed as an informant outside the Pakistani borders. By donning the burqa, Khan would have been able to establish herself as a sympathetic listener of the stories of the incarcerated women she was interviewing, for she could then signal and establish a sisterhood with them.

Khan acknowledges the potential power of the burqa when she admits that she would consider wearing one on her next foray into the court's space, but she does not actually wear it.

I have characterized the spatiality of the burqa as a portable closet to encapsulate the paradox that is the zenana, and the zenana-like spaces of a Pakistani home. By wearing a burqa—or a dupatta or a chador that represent the burqa—a woman takes her zenana with her, and creates a third space, an interstitial space, one that is transient and liminal, but also one that is mobile and protective. The donning of a burqa, the wearing of a veil, signals a woman's chastity, her virtue, and the fabric of the veil creates a protective enclosure that protects a woman's body from unwanted attention, interrupting the male gaze to allow a woman to gain access to the labour market. Since the Pakistani public space continues to be a dangerous one for women to navigate, the protection afforded by a veil cannot be easily rejected, even though it brings with it a multitude of (internalized) patriarchal controls over a woman's mobility. As my discussion of the feminist texts has shown, the veil and the segregation system represent patriarchal oppression and violence, but the fabric veil itself cannot be easily rejected. Feminists have left the issue of the gender segregation system largely unaddressed precisely because of this very paradox: even though the veil, the zenana, restricts and confines women in specific ways, it also helps women win specific concessions from patriarchy. In exchange for modest behavior in the public sphere, women gain access to education and jobs. Afshan Jafar has shown that even after General Zia's death, the impact of his Islamization campaign continues to be felt. Accordingly, Zia's Islamization "takes the privatization of crimes against women one step further by codifying it. The privatization

of domestic abuse, spousal murder, and honor killings reinforces the concepts of women as property and as repositories of family honor by giving legal sanction to such crimes” (Jafar 51). This also means that the women’s movement in Pakistan, which focused specifically on legal reforms brought about by Zia in the 1980’s, needs to critique and analyze the socio-cultural roots of patriarchal power. However, as Jafar points out, “[f]eminists in Pakistan find themselves in a predicament: a non-critical stance towards tradition and culture, though more acceptable to society, seems to betray feminist principles, while a critical stance only swells the ranks of the fundamentalists” (52) mainly because a questioning of family and tradition continues to be viewed as a questioning of traditional and religious customs. “Women’s rights” and “feminism” are seen as Western imports to Pakistan. Given the increasing power of the religious right in Pakistan in the post-9/11 era, the struggle for women’s rights that challenges the existing structures of family and tradition (including the purdah system) will be a long and arduous process. General Pervez Musharraf’s amendments to the Hadood Ordinances, one of which prevents the registration of a complaint of zina in front of police (Patel 32) goes a long way towards granting legal protection to women who were at risk of unjust punishments prior to 2006. The public and vocal protests against the Protection of Women Act of 2006, however, by religious parties (Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal) which included women legislators and MNA’s (Patel 32) demonstrates the battle-lines drawn in the name of women’s rights that are deemed to be challenges to the sanctity of religious beliefs.

During the long (often arduous) process of writing, and then editing, this dissertation on the spatiality of the veil, I found that I could not escape a nagging

question: if Pakistani feminists, artists and performers do not discuss the veil, then why exactly should I? In other words, why is the veiling and segregation system so important to me in 2012? I do not think I have an answer to this question yet. What I have is half-answers, and some suggestions, by way of offering some sense of closure to the dissertation, and a hint of a possible future.

Like most Pakistani women/girls growing up in Zia's Pakistan, the veil descended on me suddenly—like the shroud-like black cloth covering the camera in Sheema Kermani's music video. But unlike *Blasphemy's* Heer, I was not asked to observe strict purdah. Instead, I was more like the women in *Mass Transit*—protected, shielded from the politics of the city, but always aware of the violence. My life continued almost unhampered by the dupatta—except that I could not participate in sports, or any physical activity that had to be conducted in parks, stadiums, fields or any other public spaces that could not be segregated along gender-lines. While my brothers continued to play cricket in the streets, I watched from the sidelines. While my brothers climbed trees, I sat demurely with a book, uncomfortable with “girlie” topics like boys and fashion, but unable to ride a bicycle or play on the swings. My adolescence was spent learning to occupy as little space as possible on the streets of Karachi, navigating sidewalks populated by men whose sole purpose seemed to be to find an opportunity to grab my breast, pinch my stomach or touch my behind. Slightly more well-endowed than my friends, a trip to the bazaars meant harassment and pain. Luckily, I never had to take the public bus, or ride in a taxi cab—my father provided every single material luxury that would protect my body, his honour, from the dangers of Karachi's streets. I never once wore a burqa, but every gesture, every move had to be schooled, had to send the message

that I was honourable, chaste, protected, and “untouchable”. The purdah system made Karachi, my home, a panopticon: my jailors were nameless, faceless, but always present. It is this sense of the ever-present self-regulation that I am grappling with through my theoretical ruminations on purdah in Pakistan.

The purdah system—the “chador aur chardewari” slogan—is ever-present in Pakistan. It is manifested in attitudes, familial and cultural structures that function on the principle that women need male protection. Everyday activities—getting Pakistani ID cards, registering children’s births, marriages—remind women constantly of their subservient status in Pakistan. A woman cannot fill out her own request for an ID card. She needs to name a head of a household who is a male: father or husband. A passport application must be signed by father or husband, before it can be processed, the assumption being that a woman needs protection, and that protection can only come from the male members of her family. This official requirement, combined as it is with the social demand for gender-segregation (highlighted by the quote by Shahnaz Khan at the beginning of this conclusion) forces women into specific spaces, pre-defined careers and a constant regulation of behavior and gestures, all of which defines—and confines—a woman’s choices, regardless of her class and location. The specific impact and severity of the regulation differs along class and location, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, but it is important to foreground the fact that veiling and segregation has regulated women’s behavior in public space, demanding modesty and silence in exchange for security and protection.

Does that also mean that the veil should not be questioned, that the gender segregation system should be allowed to remain invisible, internalized? I argue that, by

recognizing the gender segregation system as one of the root-causes of women's development-related issues—given the specific intersections of Islam, gender and the state in Pakistan—Pakistani feminists and artists will finally be able to address the specific (patriarchal) conditions that lead to women's subjugation in Pakistan. My discussion of Pakistani feminists' texts has shown that the veiling and segregation system perpetrates specific types of violence against women, restricts women's mobility and pits them against one another. I posit that the enclosures created by the veiling system are paradoxical spaces at best. In *Blasphemy*, the *zenana* is a fractured space, with one part of the *zenana* (the courtyard) celebrated as a vibrant social space while another (the bedroom) feared and loathed by Heer as a space that enables (and conceals) her husband's sadism. Heer's relationship with the burqa is similarly paradoxical—she celebrates the anonymity it provides, but finds that that very anonymity also obliterates her power (as the royal Pir's wife). The domestic space in *Mass Transit* is similarly fractured, and feminine, but class and economic privilege are foregrounded in the novel, complicating women's interactions with their domestic and public environments significantly, creating interstitial, liminal spaces in which women congregate and socialize, but never really form a sisterhood. *Neelay Haath* focuses on women's incarceration, literalizing the *zenana* as an imprisoning, restrictive space, but one that is viewed as a comforting alternative to women's familial homes. Performances of the veil—both the video by Kermani and the play “Burqavaganza” by Nadeem—present the burqa and the veil as a paradoxical metaphor for patriarchal oppression. Kermani establishes a visual link between veils and patriarchal violence, but does not challenge the dupatta, while Nadeem presents the burqa as a metaphor for masks and institutional

corruption. He defends his choice by asserting that he does not challenge the veiling and segregation system, claiming artistic license, in order to (I argue) get his play staged in Pakistan, which results in a reduction of the burqa to merely a metaphor, negating the real experiences of women who wear the burqa on a daily basis. The internalization of the belief that women's true place is in their home allows the maintenance of the status quo, one where men continue to exercise power over women through familial and institutional structures. A challenge to the veil, however, has been seen as a questioning of Islam, due to which the system is left unchallenged by feminists in favour of more (pressing) demands, for education, for access to jobs and proper health and nutrition for women.

My discussion of the representation of different types of veils and of the different types of spaces in which those veils function has illustrated the paradoxical relationship with the (acceptance of) the veiling and segregation system on one hand, and the feminist demand for international human rights on the other, on the part of Pakistani feminists. As I have argued consistently, feminists in Pakistan have used their class, economic privilege, and, at times their transnational feminist status, to demand rights for less-privileged women, while simultaneously trying to maintain the status quo in terms of class and economic privilege. Their upper-class status also places them at risk of alienating the working-class women they are fighting for, due to which they have used the veil at times to establish a sisterhood with rural women, as my discussion of *Neelay Haath* has shown. In this scenario, then, the veil is more than a piece of cloth covering a woman's body. It is an intricate system in which religious injunction, class, social-status, gender and sexuality are all intertwined inextricably with a woman's identity and her mobility. In as much as a veil represents patriarchal restrictions on a woman's mobility, it

also represents a woman's religiosity, her acceptance of religious and socially codified principles, granting her mobility at the very moment it seeks to cloak her presence in the public space. It represents a woman's willingness to compromise, to trade on religious and social codes. It grants her power at the very moment it renders her sexuality powerless. By refusing to unveil a woman's body, Pakistani feminists have acknowledged, and then utilized, the veil's intrinsic power, but have done so without recognizing the system's ability to oppress those less powerful and articulate. The veil, then, creates a paradoxical space, one that is complex, intrinsically feminine, both restrictive and transitional at the same time. By nuancing their own complex relationship with the veil, Pakistani feminists can begin to challenge its power over women's mobility and access to jobs and education, a process that does not necessarily entail a complete unveiling of a woman's body. Instead, a responsible reading of the veiling and segregation system's manifestation in Pakistan will help highlight, and then challenge, the assumption underlying the system—that women are inferior to men. As my discussion of the texts in dialogue with theoretical ruminations on spatiality have shown, freedom for Pakistani women means a shift in perspectives about the veil—not an unveiling, but a re-veiling.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Map of Pakistan



Pakistan map showing the four provinces

## Appendix B: Translations of “Aik Larki se [To a girl]”

### To A Girl

Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe [from *Four Walls and a Black Veil*. Karachi, Oxford UP: 2004]

Bricks gaping, roof sagging,  
The ancient House of Cruel Customs  
Totters under its own weight.

In a decaying cell  
Of the House of Cruel Customs  
The walls are buckling.

Let a song echo loud and clear!  
Set a dance of passion whirling!

These superannuated walls  
Can crumble down  
And the captive princess set free.

This imprisoned Princess!  
Born of fear and oppression  
Brought up by meaningless fantasies  
Shared a bed with shameful compromises  
And gave birth only to  
Sorrow and despair

When she is unchained  
When she breathes freely  
In a dance of wild ecstasy  
She will find her long-lost self

You are a Woman  
Alive!  
Your body, a rising flame  
Your soul is tempered steel  
Your tongue forms words and speaks  
Your arms are strong, your fingers skillful

Freely desiring  
Enjoying each pleasure,  
You procreate the power of gods  
You are the one  
Who is loved by Man.

## To a Girl

Translated by Amber F. Riaz

This worn out building  
 Of cruel customs  
 Ashamed of itself  
 Quivering under its own burden  
 Every iota of which  
 Can self-destruct  
 All warped walls  
 All stooping links<sup>164</sup>

From these afflicted prisons  
 Of cruel customs,  
 One intoxicated call!  
 One bold dance!  
 This old building could also be broken  
 This imprisoned princess could also be freed

This imprisoned princess!  
 Daughter of grief and terror  
 Slave of hallucinations  
 Bed-mate of compromise  
 Mother of weakness and despair  
 When she finds liberation  
 She will breathe fearlessly  
 Lost in her intoxicated dance  
 She will find her self

You are that living woman<sup>165</sup>  
 Whose body is a flame  
 Whose soul is iron  
 Whose speech is powerful  
 In her arms is strength  
 In her fingers, creative skill  
 In her ardor, virility  
 The lover of pleasures  
 Woman, learned about passion  
 Mother of sovereignty  
 Man's beloved

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<sup>164</sup> The urdu word *kardi* can be translated as both a link in a chain, or difficult times.

<sup>165</sup> The urdu word *zan* means both woman and wife

## Curriculum Vitae

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