

**RESEARCH PAPER****Orientalist Approach in Questioning Muslim Women's Identity in Pre-Partition India: Case of Seclusion****Syed Taqī Karāmat**

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ABSTRACT

This article critically investigates how colonial India's orientalist interpretation of Muslim identity was shaped by western ideological notions. It entails an inquiry as if this strategy was only an intellectual attempt to establish colonists as superiors or if there was a power struggle at play. Although the east is seen as having absurd religions, sufi mysteries, and a static past that is slowly evolving in religion rather than science, it also inspires the west with its charismatic architecture, ancient wisdom, rich society and culture, and superior civilization. Islam views religion as a social issue, whereas the west has separated it from official policy and declared it to be an individual's concern since the renaissance. Orientalists claim that this notion of communal sensitivity tends to make them a closed, traditional culture. The west believed it was their sacred duty to spread civilization to the east because they were more advanced in civilization than the east. This was true, just as it was in India, where British colonists sought to bring about a civilising revolution. This article focuses on Muslim women's seclusion (the *Purdah* system) in colonial India and orientalists' efforts to subvert Muslim identity through it.

Keywords: Colonial India, Muslim identity, Orientalism, Seclusion, Women**Introduction**

In a foray to demystify the orientalist thought process, its discourse perceives the western society as rational through advancement of science unlike Indian subcontinent which was more indulged in religious mysticism and stagnant religion. Orientalists consider Indians as conservative who do not evolve and mostly predicate on religious authority conformed through their millennium-old religious traditions, i.e., Muslims refer to *sahābah* and *ahl al-bait* (the companions and family of the Prophet P.B.U.H), and pre-eminent religious scholars. So, *Ulamā's* connection to the Islamic tradition remained unchanged. On the contrary, Muslims who took western education have become modern Islamists for whom the religion evolves with the time and space such as *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān*. The main concern here is not to check the *Ulamā's* millennium-old learning or their connection to the Islamic tradition but to inquire into the western claim of being more rational and ultimately superior from the orient with respect to identity.

Identity is not just a place for inner self, restricting only to private life, but it does have some ideological frameworks for maintaining its interests within a social order. That's why when a Muslim identity is conceived, it is both religious and political. Identity consciousness of a community is ascribed through different factors such as their distinct role in the society, its importance through a group or individual, society's dependence on a particular group or individual, and most importantly, religion which would consume almost every aspect of the social life within that community. Orientalists seek Muslim identity through its conception of education and *purdah* (seclusion) of Muslim women. It engenders a general world view of Muslims as conservative, old, outdated, and inhumane.

The main theme within in Colonial-Oriental discourse is that the people within the colonies needed civilizing. Early British administration reflects this bias when Muslim personal law was abandoned and customary laws in the Punjab were promulgated. (Muzaffar, et. al., 2018). Though western writers, having immense oriental knowledge, were engaged to make India look irrational, mythical, and dreamlike, this stance was criticized by the writers such as Chris Bagly who pointed out that because of British codification of many localized and pragmatic customs into a unified Brahmanized Hindoo law, it made the Indian society look rigid (Ghose, 1998). It enabled colonizers to make sweeping reforms which ultimately helped the British in governance.

This article seeks a dialectical perspective of Muslim identity, i.e., Muslim women as perceived by east and west's conception of the same. It evokes a comprehensive debate on the identity of Muslim women in the Indian subcontinent, Indian perspective with respect to piety of Muslim women, conception of the West towards Islam's treatment of women, Rights of women within Islam, the importance of women in construction of Muslim identity, the impacts of intellectual orientalist discourse against Muslim women, and how much the West has succeeded in doing so?

Orientalism and Islam

Right from the inception of Islam, Orientalists have viewed it as an anti-Christian religion for instance St. John of Damascus in the late seventh century wrote "the false prophet". Enmity within theologians from eighth century Damascus to the fourteenth century Andalusia continued and Christians considered Islam as a threat to Christianity. Later in the twelfth century, Peter, the venerable translated *Qurān* into Latin and regarded Islam as anti-Christian and portrayed *Hazrat Muḥammad P.B.U.H* in an insulting way (Curtis, 2009). St. Thomas Aquinas regarded those who followed the prophet P.B.U.H as brutal and ignorant wanderers. (Schumacher, 2023). Thus, orientalist associated Islam with terror and destruction. Albert Hourani, in his work *Islam in European thought* says, "Islam was taken as negation of Christianity; *Muḥammad P.B.U.H* as an impersonator (God forbids), an evil sensualist (God forbids), and antichrist in association with the Devil (God forbids). The Islamic world was considered as Anti-Europe and held in suspicion. Christian Europe had entered into a skirmish with the Islamic orient on cultural, religious, and political fronts which would decide from then on, the very nature of the discourse between the west and east" (Kreutz, 1991).

Islam was considered as a religion imposed on human beings in *Hijāz*, which was a land of warriors under the flag of *Muḥammad P.B.U.H* and his companions. Edward Gibbon has ambivalences about Islam. On one hand, he criticizes it of its intolerance towards other religions and on the other, complements its image of paradise, and its liberalism towards friendship, science, etc. He opines that *Muḥammad P.B.U.H* erected his state and throne while having the sword in one hand and *Qurān* in the other; he had done this by ruining Christianity and Rome (Gibbon, 2015). Most of the nineteenth century philosophers including Friedrich Schlegel and Jacob Burchkhardt seek to prove the east as an antithesis of the west by claiming the caliphate system as despotic, where government and religion were not separate entities. With the same token, Ernest Renan's lecture on "Islam and Science"-delivered at the Sorbonne in 1883, depicts Islam as antithetical to progress, reason, reform, and creativity.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Europeans learned the Arabic language and translated the Arabic texts into European languages which undergirded the orientalist's exploitation of Islam. The basic problem in translating these texts is three folded i.e., selective Arabic texts, studying of the text to expose cultural differences, and lastly, they were translated with bias against Muslim Arabs and Asians. The translations were rather biased exegesis of original texts which transformed Islamic values according to western thoughts. Colonialism within India was rather a justification to provide senses to the

barbarian, irrational and backward Asian Muslims and the project was indeed a civilizing mission.

Orientalism and Gender

Edward Said's "Orientalism" provided a critique on western hegemony. While making an argument about the western disciplines of knowledge and imperial governance, Said reclines on Michele Foucault. He builds his critique on Gramsci's idea of hegemony and authority of the west over east. In representation of Islamic cultures, the Orientalist discourse was bifurcated through a schism i.e., the rationally evolved Christian West and the conservatively stagnant Islamic east. This division upbrings the biasness in the orientalist mindset to create an "otherness" of the Muslims. This constraint in the western mentality has provided for the western superiority vis a vis eastern inferiority. As the time passed, this crucial difference between the hegemonic west and the subdued east drove the former in conquest to civilize and save native women. Colonizers proudly took it as a white man's burden to civilize the east. Some colonial feminists while representing the gender conceive east and west as antithetical. They consider eastern women as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.," and western women as educated and modern having control over their bodies and sexualities, who are free to make their decisions (Mohanty, 1988).

Colonizers depict a barbaric and misogynous picture of eastern men. They portray them as the traders who trade their women as goods without having any harmony with humanity unlike civilized western men. Eastern women were portrayed in a way as they were plunged deep into the yoke of barbaric control of their men. The west through their arduous effort in producing libel, accentuated their protest against the abysmal attitude of the male-chauvinist east. Western women as conceived by the orientalists are politically and religiously more conscious of their rights, in contrast to eastern women who are subjugated in a patriarchal culture which undermines the rights of women. This evokes the orientalist perspective towards the Islam and Muslim identity which is meant for their own benefits only. The putative orientalist attitude engenders the so-called elucidation of Muslim women as "they spent their time in sexual preparation and in sexual intrigue. They were so used to off the pleasures of sex that in absence of men they dally with each other" (Kabbani, 1986).

The western belief was further strengthened by the Islamic concept of *harem* and thus marginalized Muslim women's status to mere chattels for men's use. Burton puts it in this way, "I am told, they have no balls, drums nor operas in the east, but then they have got a seraglio. besides, I am told, your Asiatic beauties are the most convenient women alive, for they have no souls; positively there is nothing in nature, I should like so much as ladies without souls; the soul, here, is the utter ruin of half of the sex" (Munro & Lal, 2005; Ahmed, et, al., 2015).). Orientalists portray three folded image of Muslim women, i.e. Oriental, Woman, and Muslim which in its comparison to the Spivak's conception of poor, black, and female entails the oppressed within society (Spivak, 2023). Orientalist also portrayed the Muslim heaven as the place of sensual satisfaction which is a dual standard as the similar construction of Christian paradise is also there in the Bible which was not referenced in their orientalist literature.

The Orientalism and Veil system in Colonial India

Muslims' viewpoint of secular and liberal Islam engenders that it is the religion which believes in egalitarianism, no matter what the gender, creed, and cast of an individual may be. Orientalists are not docile to accept this version of Islam, in contrast, they say, *Purdah* involves a complexity and rigidity of India. Seclusion proscribes women's voice being heard by a man other than her relatives unlike any other country. It keeps women confined within the walls of her *zenāna* (Woodsmall, 1975). It is pertinent to note here that orientalists have rather overruled the cultural aspect of religion which constitutes the

identity of a community. They ambivalently mixed the veil system as only an Islamic injunction and has nothing to do with the culture. To debunk this argument, it is quintessential to note here that the middle eastern system of seclusion was different from that of India which evolved from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Muslim women were socially more conscious and came out of the confining walls to talk about their rights and formed organizations such as All India Muslim Ladies Conference (AIMLC) and All India Women conference-which provided a platform for Muslim Women to talk about their concerns about *Purdah*, education, and reformation of the customs such as polygamy (Minault, 1981).

While talking about culture, it is an interesting fact that not only Muslim but Hindu women as well used to get segregated in colonial India through *Purdah* which according to Hindu reformers was the reason of degradation of Hindu Women as it was either forcefully or in a result of cultural assimilation adopted by them in Muslim rule. That's how Hindus distanced themselves from the Muslim Women and supported its abolition. In a women's conference held in Calcutta in 1929, a speaker argued, *Purdah* is absolutely foreign to our language. This system was introduced in Indian subcontinent after the Muhammadan conquest. Multiple proofs provide evidence that there was no *Purdah* here before the Muhammadans came (Barnes, 1903). This stance was later approved by the orientalist as one missionary wrote in late nineteenth century that seclusion is more generally observed where Muhammadanism is fervent. Muslim invaders forcibly added Hindu women in their *harems*. Hindus kept their women indoor for protection until *zenānah* became their own custom, and seclusion as the standard of respectability (Chowdhry, 1994). Though seclusion was a custom for Hindus and the religio-cultural aspect for Muslims, it was used for different social purposes. For example, seclusion for Muslims was a religious norm, which was being religiously and culturally practiced throughout the Muslim world and the main purpose was to keep the females confined to their feminine world when they reach to an age of puberty. Hindus, on the other hand, enforced seclusion to the females mostly after marriages which was not religiously incumbent For the west, only Muslim women were chided, predicating on their assumed backwardness, and representing the patriarchal system in colonial India. (Papanek, 1988).

There were two types of *Purdah* within colonial India. The first one is *harem*- the way in which the women confine themselves at home and the other is *burqah*- in which women covers their full body and face with a gown while going outside home. However, when the Hindu women went outside the home, they used to cover their head with (*Pallu*) the cloth of *Sārhi*. *Burqah* remained the symbol of Islamic identity in the colonial period. Though women were ridiculed in the colonial era because of the veil, it proved to be the pertinent source of Muslim identity. While discussing the experiences of the Muslim women wearing *burqah*, *Rūqqāya Sakhāwat Hossāin*, on her visit to Calcutta and Darjeeling, observes, people stared and laughed at the Muslim women wearing *burqah* and called them witches (Saiyid, 1998).

The role and character of women in an Indian Muslim society was a sensitive matter for two main reasons. Firstly, women were the fabric and source of nobleness for any Muslim family, i.e., the women with the veil were considered respectful because of conforming to the *Shariah* laws. Secondly, it was a patriarchal society where decision making was mostly in the hands of males, but with few exceptions. Orientalists exploited these circumstances and made Muslim women look oppressed, where their social role within family was merely limited to reproduction. Muslim reformists such as *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān* and *Ashraf 'Alī Thānwī* came forward to impress upon the west about the restricted role of women in Islam through references from *Qurān* to protect the honour of women in Muslim society.

Dushkā Sayyid opines in *Muslim Women of the British Punjab from Seclusion to Politics* about Hindu and Muslim Indians, females within the family and males outside the

family were not trusted when mixed and because women were more vulnerable than men while meeting a *nāmahrem*, they were kept aloof from men and thus restricted to their homes (Ahmed, 2015). The women of the *Shurrafā* (Nobles), while going outside used *Pālki* (a wooden seat covered by the cloth and lifted on men's shoulders), and a common woman wore *Burqah*. While locating the Quranic justification of *Purdah* for Muslim women, *Sayyid Amīr 'Alī* in his exegesis of the *Quranic surah* 33 verse 59 says, "O Prophet, speak to thy wives and to thy daughters, and to the wives of the faithful, that they let their wrappers fall low. Thus, will they more easily be known, and they will not be affronted. God is indulgent and merciful. Speak to believing women, that they refrain their looks and observe continence; and that they display not their ornaments except those which are external, and that they draw their kerchiefs over their bosoms" (Shabbir, 2011).

Sir Sayyid clarified his position on the *Purdah* system when he was questioned that is the *Purdah* system according to *Shariah* laws? He answered that since all the Muslim males do not live with conformity to *Shariah* laws, so why is it only incumbent upon Muslim women to conform to these laws. While responding to a flagrant opinion that Muslims might get closer to British if their women would come out of *Purdah*, he said, we should first make ourselves worthy of interacting with the British before letting our women out of *Purdah*²⁰. This was the time, ripe for the intellectuals to come forward to save the institution of *Purdah* by evoking the nature, role, and scope of the women in the society. Though the intellectuals did not directly touch the system of *Purdah*, the positive role of women was impressed upon the society. *Dushka Sayyid* argues in his work that *Altāf Hussayn Ḥālī*-a renowned poet, conveys to the society, the nobleness of the women through his poem "*Chup Kī Dād*" means praising the silence. He praises the women's role in the society. Some of the verses from his poem are;

Oh mothers, sisters, and daughters,
The honour of the world
Comes from you.
Countries' populations,
And the greatness of nations,
Come from you (Ahmad, 1983).

It was pertinent for the intellectuals to impress upon the society that the western viewpoint of the eastern women as mere means of reproduction is just not right rather absurd. *Ḥālī* pointed out that women are not the means of reproduction but the companions of their fathers before marriages and their husbands after marriages. They control the household, which is an institution within the eastern community, especially Punjab. Learning the household chores is the responsibility of the women because one day they must go to their husbands' homes where they have the responsibility to look after her new family and to train their children for the society. Orientalists predicated Muslims' conservativeness on confinement of women because the former belongs to a society where family institution is deteriorated.

It was high time to debunk Orientalists' mindset. So, a period of enlightenment started from the second decade of the twentieth century when women impressed upon the westerners that they can play their social role in the society within the means of moderate *Purdah*. For example, *Begum of Bhopāl* addressed the Mohammedan Educational conference within *burqah*, *Jahanārā Shahnawāz*, the daughter of *Muhammad Shafi* discarded *Purdah* while coming back from Calcutta to Lahore, *Begum Kishwar Abid Hussayn* recalling her mother that she did not observe *Purdah* at home, even in front of the servants, *Begum Syed Marātab Ali* had never observed strict seclusion whenever *Allāma Iqbāl* visited her home and lot others describe the liberal approach of Muslim elites towards the seclusion.

In All-India Women's Conference held in Bhopal in 1918, it was stated that, "this society is of the opinion, that for the education of women and the general welfare of society,

the severity of the *Purdah* observed should be modified, but not done away with. Muslim women should only have to observe *Purdah* to the extent required by their religion." On the other hand, colonizers had an opinion that customs within colonial India were rather demeaning for females, especially if these are concerning to brothels, marriages, and divorces. Based on this contempt, The Punjab Law Act of 1872 was promulgated which had a regressive effect on women's social status within the province. Within western intellectual debates as mentioned earlier, calling Muslims as rigid, complex, uncivilized, and Muslim women as conservative looks superficial by looking into crime of infanticide by *Rajputs* and other *Sikh* tribes in Punjab (Minault, 1981).

The government passed the regulations, firstly in 1795 and then in 1804 but in vain. Later in 1870, Female Infanticide Bill was passed to eradicate this customary practice in Punjab. This British attitude was persistent till a Shariat Act was passed by the efforts of *Muhammad Ali Jinnāh* in 1937 and Muslim Marriage Act in 1939, which confirmed the Muslim consciousness towards their identity. At this enlightenment phase the debate started as to what extent *Purdah* is necessary according to the *Shariah* because in other contemporary Muslim countries, women observed *Purdah* in a moderate style which is practical, unlike India where an impractical way of *Purdah* was being observed. Indian women belonging to rural areas could not observe *purdah* in a strict manner as they had to help their men in the fields. *Ulamā* criticized the argument that an Islamic country can hold the practice of liberal seclusion but not in case of India which is a British colony. So, it was maintained that an extra security of women which is the honour of the family is being observed in a colonized country.

The form of seclusion within colonial India remained different for different social status. For example, the woman of elites remained in their homes or came out of the houses on *Palkis* being lifted on the shoulders of their servants, while the less privileged or the rural women-involved with their husbands in the fields could not afford to remain at their houses or use *Palkis*, so they used *burqah* for seclusion. The system of *Purdah* remained very strict till inception of the twentieth century because liberal people like *Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān* was even critical of women coming out of their homes. Women Education was the pre-requisite of the colonial Punjab to get socially equipped to sustain in a slave ambiance.

In the early twentieth century, women education became the main concern of the *Sharif* Muslims. That's how number of English medium girls' schools were founded which observed *Purdah* in Lahore, i.e., Victoria Girls' high School, Queen Marry Girls' High School, etc. So, it was women education which has done a lot to change the form of seclusion within colonial Punjab. Seclusion within colonial Punjab was directly related to women education and that's why elite families within Punjab sent their daughters in English medium schools to get western education to cope the pressure of changing society. The influence of the western education on Muslims and especially on *Sharif* families within Punjab can be analysed by a fact that in the 19th century and earlier they had strict norms of seclusion because the honour of the family was based on it. It changed with the time and at a rapid pace because of the docile attitude of *Sharifs*. They sent their daughters to the English medium schools where they came under western influence and hence the hold of *Purdah* within the *Sharif* families diminished.

Conclusion

The advent of western rationalism influenced from the period of renaissance focused mainly on the humanism-which directly comprehends the classical Greek philosophy which states that, "Man is the measure of all things". So, orientalist conceived a sane and rational development of human beings to be the centre point of their philosophy. According to their perception of the east, it was declared that Asiatic Muslim women were backward, inhuman, conservative, and are mere means of reproduction. It is pertinent to mention here that Muslim women are the inevitable entity of the family through which the

respect and honour of the family is derived. Family within the east is an institution, particularly in colonial Punjab where the culture of joint family persists and thus, respect and honour of the whole institution depends on the nobleness of a single woman.

Muslims settled in India even before the invasion of *Muhammad bin Qāsim* for the purpose of trade and better livelihood, then with the passage of time they became the rulers of this land. The Islamic values of the Muslims got assimilated with the practices and way of living of land, thus both conforming each other prescribed a culture for the inhabitants of India. This culture changed with the change in people, time, and space. For example, it is an Islamic value that a woman must seclude herself from the *Nāmahrem*-the ones from whom seclusion is incumbent, now this seclusion is being observed differently with respect to space, i.e., *Hijāb* is observed in middle east which is practical and *Purdah* in Asia which is impractical for most of the working women.

The seclusion also changed with the time as it evolved with respect to the need and pragmatism of the land. This evolution confirms the modernity and liberalism which is one of the main themes of Islam, but orientalists conceived the mirror image of Islam, which is rigid, orthodox, conservative, and barbarous. Though orthodox *Ulamā* invested a lot to this conception, it was orientalist orientation to declare Islam and Muslims as uncivilized by hitting the honour of women through veil system to justify their civilizing mission.

The discussion of the veil system within Orientalist perspective covers two aspects i.e., Orientalism and Feminism. Muslims conceived this orientalist bias, which comprehends the backwardness of Islam in India as otherwise. For them, it is the respect and honour of the women on whom the respect of a family depends on and ultimately this respect constitutes the Muslim identity. Some believed that veil system in India was rigid and impractical as compared to the middle eastern seclusion for which the argument was that India was a colonized country at the first place and secondly Muslims were in minority where the honour of Muslim women was vulnerable to the colonizers and majority Hindus, so it was incumbent upon the Muslim families to have strict seclusion.

Muslim reformers, thinkers, and poets have responded back on orientalist exposition of Muslim women. Even Muslim women of Punjab and intellectuals came forward to answer orientalists and thus in the earlier period of the twentieth century, *Hāli* and *Iqbāl* wrote their poems for the respect of women and the All-India Women conference was held for the evolution the *Purdah* system which would be both practical and Islamic. It also shows that orientalist critiques were unfair because for them what is conservative, inhumane, and misogynist is respectful, noble, cultural, and secure for women. Furthermore, the orientalist conception of rigidity and conservativeness within Islam is not factual because women in the early twentieth century came out of their homes with modified seclusion which shows Islam is both moderate, liberal, and evolving.

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