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## **Disempowering Androcentrism through the Burqa: Diluting the Misconstructions behind the Hijab through the Study of *The Holy Woman***

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### **Abstract:**

The veil has always perplexed and tantalized the human world and has thus become a center of debate, dialogue and discourse. The present paper investigates the variegated reasons behind the tradition of veiling and unveiling of the Muslim women. The paper brings forth the conflicting response of women towards the veil and how they have succeeded in transforming their subjugation into an enlightening experience. Muslim women no longer loath this garment which conceals their body but see it as a mark of celebration of their identity. In this context, *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz underlines and validates the above point. In the novel, the protagonist Zarri Bano's initial reluctance towards Burqa dilutes into willing acceptance after she becomes a Holy woman and delves into the study of Islam. Zarri Bano is then able to shatter the stereotypes and prejudices associated with the religion of Islam. The novel reinforces the stand that Burqa apart from being oppressive is being willingly accepted by the Muslim women. Thus, from a symbol of oppression, veil has become a symbol of personal choice.

**Keywords: Burqa, Islam, Patriarchy, Muslim Women, Feminism.**

### **Introduction**

Since times immemorial, veils of different styles and forms were prevalent in different cultures. "The act of veiling has existed even before the existence of Islam. It has particularly

spread in Arab cultures even in Greek and Rome” (Juwariyah 81). And veiling in some religions is not seen as a sign of oppression. “Head dress is not a symbol with Islam only. Many Jewish women and men, as well as Christian women in the Middle East and elsewhere, wear different types of head dresses. In the Muslim world, it is also common for men to wear various types of head dress. Nevertheless, contemporary debates tend to focus on the question on head dress for Muslim women....In the Quran, this term refers not to female dress, but to the curtain that was ordained to be put up between Prophet’s wives and men in Medina. The hijab was the responsibility of the men, not the women. In later Muslim societies the term hijab has been used as a reference to the head dress of women. In this way the meaning of Hijab has evolved over time” (Amer 367-368). When Islam came, it standardized the dress code for women. Islam required women to dress modestly. Veil was considered a means of guarding women from the male gaze. Thus veil became a metaphor for modesty and honor. Also initially the tradition of veiling was not associated with religion but by environment. Women chose veil to escape the extreme heat of the desert. Veil was also related to class and position. Upper class women wore veil as they could afford it while the lower class women who had to work in the fields did not wear it. “The literal meaning of hijab is curtain or veil, as it is mostly used in English. The word is a part of Quranic revelation ...believed to be the basis of Islamic law concerning modesty and the code of interaction between men and women....In broader terms, hijab is believed to be a whole code of morality and a decent way of conduct for both male and female”(Noor, 30). Veil is a head covering of a Muslim woman. “The veil can take any form of veiling (i.e. burqa, niqab, chador and headscarf as long as the hair is completely covered” (Shah 109). The most common form of veiling is Hijab, which is a kind of headscarf worn by Muslim women, covering the head and showing only the face. It has another piece of clothing covering the body. Chador refers to a full cloak covering the head and the body. It is said to have been used by Iranian women. Niqab and Burqa are different from Hijab and Chador as not only do they cover the body and the head, but also the face. The difference between Niqab and Burqa is that Niqab has a small space to show the eyes, while Burqa does not leave a single open space in the face as the eyes are covered by a grill. While Niqab is popular in Saudi, Burqa is believed to be imposed by Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Thus the extent to which a woman covers herself or is covered by society depends to which society she belongs.

## Veil and Oppression

The word veil points out at the exploitation and the marginalization of women and the veiling of Muslim Women raises questions as to whether the veil is a symbol of women's subordination or a means of emancipation. There have been debates on the issue of veiling throughout the world which have led to polarized views regarding veiling of women. "The status of women in Islam has always been an issue of much debate and scrutiny, particularly by the west. The observations and experiences of European travelers and later of colonial rulers were instrumental in shaping the negative image of Islam.... The Europeans condemned Islam for its unfair treatment of women and impressed upon the colonized the need to liberate the women, not as a moral obligation but also a political tool. Thus the West tried to establish western civilization's supremacy over what is perceived as the backward and inferior Islamic civilization" (Noor 33). This in a way tried to impose western supremacy over the Islamic culture. "Western narrative (is) that the veil signified oppression, therefore those who called for its abandonment were feminists and those opposing its abandonment were anti feminists" (Ahmad 162). The western colonial rhetoric describes the tradition of veiling as an expression of Muslim backwardness. Thus, a woman in veil is seen as a victim of oppression by the West since it does not conform to the western values. The veil is described as a sign of enslavement which confines the women within the household and debar her from the public life. Thus, the Muslim women were motivated to abandon veil and adopt and emulate the western lifestyle. Thus abandoning of the veil was to emulate the West and an aspiration to modernity. "On one hand, some countries like France, Turkey and Germany have banned veiling in public institutions, while others, like United Kingdom have left decisions to head of schools. Integration in the French system implies loss of ethnic identity" (Bhowon 5). So, there seems to be ambiguity in reaching to a definite consensus regarding veil by the European countries. "For Europeans, the sight of a veiled woman represents the presence of Islamic fundamentalism in their heartland. For Muslims, the criticism of Islamic principles enshrined in the Holy Quran and its opposition entails a confirmation of growing Islamophobia in the west. However, in this whole debate what has been overlooked is the voice of the Muslim woman whose free choice was at stake" (Noor 28). Thus, while burqa is seen as a symbol of male oppression by the West, some section of Muslim women celebrate the wearing of burqa. For Muslim women burqa is associated with their mobility, more participation in the public places and grants them security

and honor. Thus, the question remains unanswered as to how Muslim women feel about the hijab and what it means to Muslim women who wear it and who choose not to wear it.

### **Resurgence of veil**

After the abandonment of the veil, its resurgence can be seen as retaliation to the colonial thought. The consistent increase in the number of Muslim women wearing the veil worldwide shows that they want to assert and make their identity visible since veil is the most perceptible symbol of Muslim identity. The reasons for wearing the hijab are diverse and varied. The Muslim women choose to wear the veil to show that they want to assert their identity, preserve their native culture and practices, religious obligation or personal choice, to gain respect to create a safe space avoiding male attention. Veil also provides women the freedom of mobility, protects them against sexual harassment or a fashion statement. Also women can focus more on the attainment of her goals and ambitions rather than indulging in the trivial aspect of looking beautiful. Further it has been suggested that some women wear hijab as they feel responsible for a moral society and believe it is their duty to dress modestly as they signify the culture of the society. "For women who wear the hijab, becomes a matter of religious obedience. According to them this is required in Islam, prescribed in the Quran....The hijab becomes a symbolic boundary that draws the line between two groups of Muslim women, the obedient and practicing Muslim women and the women who, for various reasons, do not fulfill their moral obligation" (Furseth 365-85). But more importantly we see that Muslim women want to be heard and demand respect and recognition as human beings whether veiled or not. "How veiling affects women and how women perceive it depend on different factors, particularly those which become the cause of the veiling. The women who choose to wear the veil as an independent decision see it as liberating, while those who are forced to wear it may look at it as oppression....In many societies women have been forced to veil by the families, particularly in patriarchal set ups. At the same time, there are women who choose hijab as their independent decision. In case of a ban on hijab, the former category would obviously feel emancipated, while in the latter case they would deem it as an attack on their freedom and right to independent choice" (Noor 31). Thus, the women who wear it out of personal choice see it as liberating, while those who are forced to wear it see it as oppression. How the veil affects her mobility, education, independence and does it leads to her domesticity, all these factors affect the process of veiling. On the whole, they

don't want to be judged on the basis of the use or disuse of the veil. The novel, *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz reinforces the stand that Burqa apart from being oppressive is being willingly accepted by the Muslim women. Zarri Bano, a university graduate and an upholder of feminist movement, becomes a Holy woman due to patriarchal pressure. But as she becomes a knower of Islam, she starts finding her comfort zone in that black cloak which once suffocated her. The novel *The Holy Woman* deals with the archaic customs that oppress and victimize women of the tribal community of Sindh province in Pakistan. The novel opens with a scene of a mela. It is the first place where Zarri Bano is introduced as a rebel with feminist fervor. Her presence in the mela amidst male gathering shows the freedom which Zarri Bano enjoys. All other women are forbidden to take part in such festivity. Zarri Bano appears to be an unconventional woman who does not care to cover her head. Zarri Bano dislikes wearing dupatta on her head which women are required customarily. Zarri Bano is in love with Sikander and wants to marry him but makes it clear to him that she would not change herself after the marriage and will continue to pursue her career and ambitions. This shows that Zarri Bano is a feminist and a true symbol of modernity. She opposes traditionalism which legitimizes the subordination of women in society. But her father Habib disapproves the marriage. The patriarch in him compels him to be the chooser and master of her daughter's destiny. A tragic death of Zarri Bano's brother Jafar has brought the question of inheritance to the forefront. Habib doesn't want to hand over his property to a stranger who just happens to marry his daughter. To save his land he wishes Zarri Bano to become a Holy Woman. Zarri Bano pleads saying that she is very much a worldly woman and is not meant for a saintly life but Habib is bent upon to invoke the century's old barbaric custom of marrying the woman to Quran. She doesn't want to be stripped off her identity and ideology. She laments over her sad fate, "The irony of all ironies, for which I can never forgive myself, is that it has happened to me- a feminist, a defender of women's rights. I have been living in a glass house of make-believe" (Shahraz 96). She finally reconciles to her fate. She is now destined to spend her rest of her life behind the deadening darkness of Burqa. "Zarri Bano stood frozen in the burqa, dehumanized" (Shahraz 160). She feels suffocated in Burqa. Unable to control her agonized cry, Zarri Bano says in poignant words, "Zarri Bano is dead" (Shahraz 162). She feels that her free soul has been imprisoned behind the Burqa and a new identity has been enforced on her. She is made to live a simple life of a nun by putting aside worldly things. This tradition of Shahzadi Ibadat is inhuman and against the teachings of Islam.

Zarri Bano passes through a psychic bewilderedness after becoming the Holy woman. The woman who loved feministic ways and is admired for her astounding beauty has to cover herself behind the burqa. As a feminist, she was a staunch critic of wearing burqa and called it a symbol of patriarchal oppression. “Can any woman look lovely in this garment? I loathe this cloth, sister Sakina. It burns my body! I have never even worn a shawl, a chador, let alone a burqa in my entire life” (Shahraz 161). But later Zarri Bano gives a new meaning to burqa after becoming a Holy woman. She calls it her ‘second skin’. She adheres to this dress even at home. Even after her marriage with Sikander, she continues to wear it in her husband’s house. When her mother asks her to give up burqa, she instantly explains that discarding burqa is similar to that challenge, she once experienced when she was compelled to adopt this dress. “Until now, I have gone everywhere in my burqa; now I am requested to discard it at home. I am so used to the burqa, feel so totally happy and safe behind it. Mother, that without it I feel naked and disorientated, very conscious of my body and its shape” (Shahraz 504). It means she wears burqa on her volition and free will. Thus, the burqa for Zarri Bano becomes a strategy to attain emancipation. She has transformed it, a symbol of oppression into her empowerment. The Islamic study in Egypt brought a change in Zarri Bano’s outlook. She gives a new connotation to the use of Burqa. While conversing with a group of women in Regent Park mosque in central London on the topic of religion and burqa, she points out that western people have always misunderstood it as a symbol of oppression and sexual segregation. She explains that two years ago I wanted to tear it aside, now I cannot live without it because, “The veil has given me a sense of myself worth, respect and dignity. Above all, it has freed me from vanity” (Shahraz 317). There is an international scarf revolution, a symbol of Muslim women’s ‘unity’. There is a full spectrum of choices and each woman is free to make her own decision. To some it is tradition, decorum and modesty and for others it is a symbol of membership or they wear it as a matter of religious faith or to live free of the male gaze. Zarri Bano ardently longs for the burqa as it made her the most respected and revered woman ‘Holy Woman’. Veiled Zarri Bano is now admired for her intellect rather than her beauty and physical charms. Under the cover of burqa, Zarri Bano goes around the world uninhibited and gains worldly knowledge and acclaim. Thus, veiled Zarri Bano is a symbol of female strength and emancipation rather oppression. The figure of Zarri Bano in burqa is antithetical to notion that burqa symbolizes oppression.

## Conclusion

Thus, from a symbol of oppression, veil has become a symbol of personal choice and liberation. Even Muslim women are coming forward to end the social disgrace associated with the burqa. Today due to this revolution, women are enjoying freedoms to dress the way they want. Some prefer to wear a hijab, niqab, dupatta or a burqa while others don't veil themselves at all. For some, veil is a sign of patriarchal oppression while for others it is a sign of identity, modesty, preservation of culture or fashion. Thus, the debate again comes back to women's choices being limited by the popular norms of society. For women to choose an unpopular way is to invite opposition from society as a whole, including that of women who conform to society's norms. For Muslim women living in both worlds, western and Muslim societies, the real challenge is to secure their rights to free choice, be it through religion or liberalism. Thus, the study reveals that the veil has had a significant impact on women.

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