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VEILING AND VISIBILITY: NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN QAISRA SHAHRAZ'S *THE HOLY WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

The veil is a complex symbol deeply intertwined with notions of identity, agency, and resistance, carrying diverse meanings across cultures and narratives. This article explores the veiling paradox -- the veil as both a symbol of resilience and a product of the male gaze -- revealing its dual role as a site of empowerment and contention. Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* (2001) celebrates the veil as a form of empowerment, while insights from Arab Muslim writers and Western critiques deconstruct traditional assumptions. The article conceptualizes veiling as a historically layered and culturally contingent practice situated at the nexus of religion, gender, class, and power. By incorporating Islamic feminist hermeneutics, transnational critique, and material-cultural analysis, it provides a comprehensive and adaptable lens through which to examine veiling in Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* and within broader Muslim-majority literary traditions. This approach resists reductive interpretations by foregrounding the multiplicity of meanings embedded in veiling practices, thereby acknowledging both their restrictive and emancipatory dimensions. Ultimately, the framework seeks to facilitate critical scholarship that engages with diverse voices, contexts, and interpretive traditions.

Keywords: veil, agency, identity politics, Islamic feminism, resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan-born Qaisra Shahraz, based in the UK since 1966, is the author of *The Holy Woman* (2011), *Typhoon* (2003), and *Revolt* (2013), along with several short stories. Her fiction, deeply connected to Pakistan, foregrounds issues of feudal oppression, patriarchal customs, family honor, and women's autonomy, while also engaging with the cultural identities of Muslim women in the West. *The Holy Woman,* set in rural Pakistan, critiques traditions that marginalize women, whereas her diasporic perspective enables her to interrogate Western stereotypes, particularly regarding the veil. She uses her diasporic experiences to analyse and present the position of women in Pakistani society through themes which are of greater significance and relevance at both national and international levels. Through Zarri Bano's journey in *The Holy Woman*, Shahraz redefines veiling as a conscious act of faith rather than oppression.

The practice of veiling—whether termed hijab, *purdah* (curtain or separator), or *chador* (outer garment or open cloak)—has a long and complex history that predates Islam. In pre-Islamic societies of the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Europe, veiling was largely a cultural marker of status and respectability, adopted by elite women to distinguish themselves from laboring classes

(Hoodfar, 2001). Over time, however, the veil became overdetermined with religious, cultural, and political meanings, making it one of the most contested symbols of womanhood across societies. In contemporary debates, particularly within Western discourse, the veil is often cast in binary terms: as either a symbol of patriarchal oppression or, conversely, as a marker of religious devotion. Such reductive framings, however, obscure the particular histories and lived experiences that shape veiling practices in different contexts.

In Pakistan, the meanings of the veil are especially layered and cannot be understood apart from the country's colonial history, Islamic reform movements, feudal traditions, and class dynamics. Unlike Iran or Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has not legally mandated the hijab, yet practices of purdah remain socially entrenched, especially in rural and feudal communities where veiling is tied to honor, morality, and patriarchal authority. At the same time, in urban and educated milieus, the hijab can signify a conscious choice—an expression of religious piety, personal dignity, or even feminist resistance to Western ideals of objectification. Thus, the veil in Pakistan is not monolithic: it may function as coercive imposition in some contexts and as a voluntary affirmation of identity in others.

This duality reveals why the Pakistani experience of veiling resists universalist interpretations. The veil here operates as both a cultural institution regulating women's mobility and as a dynamic practice through which women negotiate autonomy, faith, and social belonging. Such complexity underscores the inadequacy of Western stereotypes that equate veiling solely with subjugation, and highlights instead how local contexts inflect its meanings. Within this framework, Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* becomes a pivotal literary text. By dramatizing Zarri Bano's forced adoption of the veil within a feudal-patriarchal order, the novel foregrounds the tensions between coercion and agency, tradition and self-definition. It thereby provides a critical lens for exploring how veiling in Pakistan embodies multiple, often competing, significations that move beyond reductive binaries.

Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* recounts the story of Zarri Bano, a beautiful, educated woman whose life is overturned by the rigid traditions of feudal Sindh. After her brother's death, her father compels her to become *Shahzadi Ibbadat* (holy woman), condemning her to celibacy and spiritual seclusion. Forced to renounce her love for Sikander, Zarri Bano struggles between the imposed identity of a "holy woman" and her suppressed desires. Shahraz charts this conflict to show how oppressive customs distort women's lives under the guise of honor and piety. Ultimately, Zarri Bano reclaims her right to love by marrying Sikander, affirming both her religious identity and her womanhood. In doing so, the novel underscores Islam's rejection of traditions that deny women's agency, contrasting with Christianity's institution of nuns. Sikander, who values her intellect and spirituality, embodies a partnership rooted in dignity and mutual respect.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The veil remains one of the most contested symbols in global discourse on Muslim women—alternately framed in Western narratives as a sign of patriarchal oppression, while in many Muslim contexts it is understood as an emblem of dignity, agency, and faith. Such polarizations flatten the diverse lived experiences of Muslim women and perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes that deny them subjectivity and voice. Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* intervenes in this debate by offering a nuanced representation of veiling as a dynamic, evolving practice rather than a fixed symbol. Through the trajectory of Zarri Bano, the novel illustrates how veiling moves from coercion under patriarchal and feudal authority to a chosen expression of self-respect, dignity, and agency.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant because it highlights how Shahraz complicates the binary of oppression versus liberation by demonstrating that veiling can serve as both a site of constraint and empowerment, depending on context and agency. By engaging with Islamic feminist perspectives—such as those of Mernissi, Ahmed, and Bullock—the analysis situates *The Holy Woman* within broader debates about identity, modesty, and women's autonomy in Muslim societies. Shahraz's novel thus contributes to Islamic feminist thought by reclaiming veiling from both patriarchal misuse and Western misrepresentation, presenting it instead as a polyvalent symbol negotiated by women themselves. The findings offer fresh insights into the study of veiling by foregrounding Muslim women's voices and choices, countering homogenizing Western portrayals, and illuminating how literary narratives can articulate the complexities of female subjectivity within Islamic frameworks. In doing so, this research not only advances appreciation of Shahraz's fiction but also enriches the discourse on Islamic feminism by showing how cultural practices like veiling may be reinterpreted as tools of resilience, dignity, and self-determination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The tradition of veiling in Muslim societies has been a deeply significant cultural and religious practice. While Western narratives often frame the veil as a symbol of patriarchal oppression, numerous Arab and Muslim writers present a contrasting viewpoint, emphasizing its empowering, spiritual, and cultural dimensions. These perspectives are diverse and layered, ranging from feminist reinterpretations of religious texts to personal narratives about self-expression and agency. In the Pakistani context the terms 'veiling' and 'purdah' are often used synonymously. However, there is a difference in their meaning. "Purdah" is a Persian word that means curtain, in the form of clothes denoting *burqa* or *chador* whose purpose is to cover or conceal the female body. The curtain in the aforementioned sense can be literal or metaphorical or it can be a separation between the worlds of men and women (Khan, 1999, p. 27). However, the word is most commonly used to describe the physical veiling of women (Critelli, 2010, p. 238), the system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty particularly in Pakistan and India (Papanek, 1971, p. 517). Veiling is an abstruse term which is defined as generally referring to a variety of cloth covers of the head such as the hijab, *burqa*, and *niqab* (a form of hijab which covers the entire body and face, leaving the area around the eyes visible), headscarves and shawls (Renne), but which may also be part of a bigger dress containing various degrees and styles of folding, draping, covering and wrapping so that the face and body are wholly or partly concealed (Rasmussen, 2013, p. 237).

Susan J. Rasmussen (2013) in her article, "Re-casting the Veil: Situated Meanings of Covering" enumerates three inter connected challenges which are key to understanding the whole debate enveloping the phenomenon of veil and veiling. First of these is the assumption on the part of the West that all women who wear the veil are suppressed; second is the recurring issue of a single word "veil" being used widely as a cover-term for a variety of practices carried out mostly but not entirely by Muslim women; and thirdly, this rhetoric of the veil and veiling has become an obsession of the West thereby creating over generalisations of Islam and Muslim women (p. 238). Alia Al-Saji when examining the public debate on French law (2004) banning "conspicuous religious signs in schools" argues that the western representation of veiled Muslim women as a sign of gender suppression and subjugation constitutes a type of racialization that is both cultural

and religious. By highlighting veiling as oppressive, backward and dehumanizing, western constructions of identity and gender are mirrored as positive in contrast (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 875).

The veil has become much more than a mere piece of clothing in a Muslim woman's apparel as it has been turned into a political matter. Pamela Taylor is of the view that there are a multitude of grave problems facing Muslim women around the globe such as genital mutilation, domestic abuse, honour killings and so on which are real issues as compared to a piece of clothing (Taylor, 2008, p. 122). Furthermore, she laments that, "so much energy has been tied up into worry about what women wear" (Taylor, 2008, p. 123). Invariably donning a veil is considered oppressive whereas wearing a skirt or a bikini emancipating. However, it is worth noting that in all this debate and argumentation on veiling, forced *unveiling* has never been highlighted by the western media or the orientalist feminists. Mohja Kahf elaborates how one comes across so many stories of women forced to veil (in the context of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Taliban Afghanistan era) in the western media, "yet forced unveiling has been the experience of the last century for far greater masses of Muslim women" (Kahf, 2008, p. 31). Forced *unveiling* is also a violation of women's freedom but this has never drawn any objection from the West. Kahf (2008) writes:

> Being stripped off their veil is a trauma masses of women in the twentieth century Middle East know. In country after country, from Turkey to Tunisia, from 1925 to the present, Muslim women have been yanked, coerced, and coaxed out of their veils by governments and social elites. The story of the forcibly unveiled woman almost never makes the cover of *Time, Ms.*, or the Arabic weeklies *Al-Majalla* or *Sayyidati*. (p. 31)

According to Mashael Al-Sudeary (2012) the veil is also assumed responsible for keeping women subservient and as a consequence thwarting society and culture from attaining progress or modernity (p. 534). It is considered an icon of cultural backwardness (Hasan, 2005, p. 43). There are various motivations or reasons as to why Muslim women veil or choose to veil whether living in the West or in Muslim countries in the East. Veiling conveys different connotations in different cultures and communities it is practised in, and therefore it cannot be reduced to a single cultural understanding. Bhowon and Bundhoo (2016), while listing the various reasons behind veiling, point out that some women wear the veil because of family pressure, some wear it to avoid objectification and to be able to negotiate public spaces, while others wear it as a religious manifestation to make their Muslim identity visible (p. 34). Women may also consciously choose to veil to facilitate their access to public spaces, including higher education, and job opportunities. Some women wear a veil as part of their religious faith or as an assertion of their identity, whereas others believe that it sets them free from sexual objectification (Ahmed, 2020, pp. 233-241).

There have been a number of studies and research aimed at correcting misapprehensions and misconceptions about the stereotypical usage of the veil and veiling thereby exhibiting greater sensitivity and understanding of the issue. Non-fictional works of Fadwa El Guindi, Leila Ahmed, Homa Hoodfar, Alia Al-Saji, Susan Rasmussen, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Mohja Kahf and Mashael Al-Sudeary echo the positive representations of the veil where it is referred to as something that provides privacy and respect. The affirmative analyses of the veil in the aforementioned writers' works take on more importance and relevance when highlighted in works of fiction such as in *The Holy Woman* where Shahraz endeavours to engage with the issue of veil.

Fatima Mernissi, a pioneering Moroccan sociologist and feminist intellectual, has significantly contributed to discourse surrounding the roles of women in Islamic societies. In her seminal book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, Mernissi (1991) analyses how religious practices have been historically reinterpreted to suit patriarchal interests rather than adhering to the true egalitarian principles of Islam. Her central argument

revolves around the distinction between Islam as a faith and how its tenets have been distorted by socio-political forces. She asserts that Islam supports the empowerment and dignity of women. She believes that the veiling practice, far from being intrinsically oppressive, has often been politically manipulated by male elites to enforce social control over women. It is this distortion, rather than religious doctrine, that has sustained the perception of Muslim women as passive and subjugated. Mernissi's feminist interpretation suggests that reclaiming the veil may be a means for Muslim women to assert their presence and agency within society. Mernissi also explores the psychological aspects of veiling, explaining how it can be a source of security and comfort for some women. For them, the veil becomes a shield against the pervasive male gaze and societal judgment based on physical appearance. By focusing on a woman's intellect, character, and contributions, rather than her physicality, the veil can promote a sense of self-worth that is independent of superficial standards.

Additionally, Mernissi notes that the Western obsession with unveiling Muslim women is itself a form of cultural hegemony. She argues that just as some patriarchal Muslim societies impose the veil on women, Western societies impose their own standards of beauty and dress. Both systems, in Mernissi's view, seek to control women's bodies rather than allowing them the freedom to choose how they wish to present themselves (Mernissi, 1987, p. 85). Mernissi encourages a re-evaluation of the veil as a symbol.

Katherine Bullock, in *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (2007), reshapes dominant perceptions of the hijab. Once viewing the veil as inherently oppressive, she re-evaluated this belief through lived experience within Muslim communities and direct engagement with Islamic teachings. A convert to Islam, Bullock's own transformation strengthens her argument. For her, adopting the hijab became both a spiritual practice and liberation from Western beauty ideals. One of her key arguments is that Western feminist critiques are ethnocentric, equating freedom with sexual display. Bullock counters that modesty itself can be empowering, allowing women to be valued for intellect and character rather than appearance. She refuses to depict veiled women as passive victims. Her scholarship has been pivotal in challenging stereotypes and broadening feminist discourse. By centering Muslim women's voices, Bullock advances a nuanced understanding of the hijab and continues to influence debates on Islam, feminism, and multiculturalism.

Likewise, Leila Ahmed in her book *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (2011), provides a detailed historical and cultural analysis of the re-emergence of veiling among Muslim women. Her book centres on the discussion of the modern revival of veil, especially from the mid-20th century. Contrary to the popular notion that this resurgence was solely driven by patriarchal control, Ahmed argues that many women adopted the veil as a form of resistance to Western cultural imperialism and as a way to assert their cultural and religious identity. Ahmed also questions the Western feminist assumption that the veil is inherently oppressive. Through interviews and extensive field research, she reveals that for many Muslim women, the hijab and other forms of veiling are empowering choices that allow them to navigate public spaces with a sense of dignity and respect. The veil, Ahmed argues, can be a tool for reclaiming agency in environments where women's appearances are often subject to scrutiny and objectification. Ahmed's work challenges simplistic narratives and calls for a more empathetic and intersectional understanding of Muslim women's experiences.

Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi is another prominent scholar, writer, and editor who has contributed to the discourse surrounding Muslim women and the practice of veiling. She co-edited the powerful anthology *Mirror on the Veil: A Collection of Personal Essays on Hijab and Veiling* with Shaheen Pasha (2017). This compilation brings together diverse voices from across cultural and

geographical backgrounds, offering a wide range of perspectives on the meanings and experiences associated with veiling, including hijab, *naqab*, and other such forms. *Mirror on the Veil* elucidates that there is a subjective and diversified nature of women's choices for the hijab, discussing its role as a means of empowerment, identification, and spiritual fulfilment (Pasha-Zaidi, Nausheen & Pasha, Shaheen, 2017, p. 45).

These diverse writings underscore that the veil is not a monolithic symbol but rather a complex, multifaceted practice that may mean different things to different women. Whether representing religious devotion, cultural pride, or personal empowerment, the veil often is an affirmation of identity and autonomy for many Muslim women. Centring the voices of Muslim women and scholars, these works offer nuanced understanding that cannot be accomplished with simplistic stories of oppression.

This study contributes to scholarship on veiling by bridging the gap between theoretical debates and literary representation. Whereas existing research largely treats the veil through sociological, historical, or theological lenses (Mernissi, Ahmed, Bullock, Hoodfar), this analysis of Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* demonstrates how fiction captures its polyvalent meanings in lived experience. Through Zarri Bano's shifting relationship with veiling—from patriarchal imposition to conscious re-appropriation—the novel resists reductive binaries of oppression and liberation, illustrating instead how women negotiate dignity, agency, and faith within restrictive structures. In doing so, the study situates literature as a critical site of knowledge production that complicates homogenizing Western portrayals and advances Islamic feminist discourse by foregrounding veiling as a dynamic, context-dependent practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study approaches veiling as a historically layered, culturally contingent practice situated at the intersection of religion, gender, class, and power. Drawing on Islamic feminist hermeneutics, transnational critique, and material-cultural analysis, the framework resists reductive interpretations and instead highlights the shifting meanings of veiling across time and context. Hoodfar's insight that veiling predates Islam—originating in pre-Islamic Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies as a marker of privilege and status—disrupts the misconception that it is exclusively Islamic. This historical perspective repositions veiling as a cultural rather than strictly religious practice, while also underscoring how its meanings have been reshaped in different contexts.

Within this framework, scholars such as Mernissi, Bullock, Ahmed, and Al-Saji illuminate how veiling functions as a contested but polyvalent symbol. Mernissi critiques patriarchal distortions of Islamic teachings while reclaiming the veil as a potential site of dignity and self-worth. Bullock positions veiling as a conscious feminist choice, countering Western feminist assumptions that equate freedom with sexual display. Ahmed situates the modern revival of veiling within broader movements of cultural and political resistance to Western dominance, while Al-Saji critiques Orientalist portrayals that frame the veil as inherently oppressive. Together, these perspectives provide a flexible analytical lens for examining Shahraz's *The Holy Woman*, allowing veiling to be read not as a static emblem of oppression or liberation, but as a dynamic practice negotiated by women in relation to faith, identity, and power. This theoretical grounding informs the methodology of the present study by guiding its textual analysis of *The Holy Woman*, ensuring that the novel's representations of veiling are examined within both their historical-cultural contexts and their feminist interpretive possibilities.

DISCUSSION

Shahraz's position as a Pakistani diaspora writer in the UK is significant in her choice to address veiling, as it provides a dual lens on both Pakistani realities and Western perceptions. Her diasporic perspective enables her to challenge Orientalist stereotypes that equate veiling with oppression, presenting instead the nuanced ways in which women exercise agency, faith, and cultural identity. By exploring veiling within both rural Pakistani and diasporic contexts, Shahraz negotiates tensions between tradition and modernity; while amplifying marginalized voices whose experiences are diverse and context-specific. This vantage allows her fiction to serve as a bridge between social critique and literary representation, portraying the veil as a site of autonomy, dignity, and resistance rather than a monolithic symbol of subjugation.

In Shahraz's writings, veiling or wearing the hijab is one of the most prominent issues. Through it she desires to debunk stereotyped views and Western myths that Muslim women are oppressed and also to highlight that in the modern Muslim world, most women are making choices in taking to the veil wholeheartedly and for personal reasons and feelings of self-esteem, dignity and a Muslim identity. Shahraz lives in the UK and so her including a debate on veiling in *The Holy Woman* can be a result of the Muslim women veiling and oppression rhetoric that has been a constant in the existing post-9/11 era in the West. In *The Holy Woman* the veil or *burqa* is an important motif. It is a powerful defining symbol, and it would be naive to generalise this aspect. As Jennifer Heath (2008) in *The Veil: Women Writers on its History, Lore and Politics* writes, "veiling has become globally polarizing, a locus for the struggle between Islam and the West and between contemporary and traditional interpretations of Islam" (p. 1).

In *The Holy Woman*, Shahraz explores how the veil shapes the lives of Muslim women in Pakistan, especially within rural and patriarchal settings (Jadoon, 2015). The story follows Zarri Bano through two very different stages of her life, each marked by her changing attitude toward veiling. At first, as a modern, liberal member of APWA (All Pakistan Women's Association), she sees the veil as a form of oppression. When she is forced into a burqa, she feels stripped of her identity and describes the experience as dehumanizing (Shahraz, 2001, p.144). Later, after becoming the "Holy Woman" and gaining a deeper understanding of Islam, Zarri Bano's perspective shifts. She comes to embrace the veil, seeing it as a source of dignity, self-respect, and freedom from vanity (Shahraz, 2001, p. 284). Her transformation reflects the novel's broader exploration of how personal experience and religious interpretation shape the meaning of the veil.

The debate surrounding the phenomenon of veiling or hijab over the last two decades has made it a point of controversy and it has often been associated with the status and position of Muslim women. Shahraz through her mouthpiece Zarri Bano, boldly criticizes the West for its evaluation of veiling and flatly dismisses the idea of restraint as allegedly attached to it. She says:

> The veil has always perplexed and tantalised the Western world, both men and women alike. It is a disconcerting phenomenon for them as much now as it ever was. Westerners have always misunderstood the reason why women wear it. To add insult to injury, they see it as a symbol of male oppression -- a widely accepted stereotyped myth. They think that women are forced to wear it by their menfolk … in the current climate, there are more women now in the hijab, by their own free will, than ever before (Shahraz, 2001, p. 284).

Although Bano accepts that initially she did find it "very strange", now she "feel(s) bare without it" (Shahraz, 2001, pp. 284-85). Her first encounter with the veil or burqa comes about at her veiling ceremony (the ceremony held to marry her to the Quran). She sees Sakina, another *Shahzadi Ibadat* or holy woman who comes to initiate Zarri Bano into her new role at the

ceremony, as a "dark forbidding image" clad in a "heavy black veil" whose mere sight makes her recoil and horrified (Shahraz, 2001, p. 142). Similarly, when Zarri Bano wears the burqa for the first time she feels "dehumanised" and "suffocated" under the garment which she loathingly calls "a large black tent" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 144). Her feeling of revulsion and hatred for the burqa in the beginning is brought about in stark contrast to her later feelings of security and dignity for it. Al-Sudeary (2012) describes the veil as a second skin and as a part of the Muslim women's living existence (p. 546) which is echoed in Zarri Bano's acknowledging that the burqa has become her "second skin" and a part of her new identity (Shahraz, 2001, p. 163). In the beginning she is made to wear the veil as part of her role as a holy woman; however later after studying Islam and learning about it she chooses to wear the veil out of her free will. This is the kind of empowerment that Islam gives women and critics like Mernissi highlighted repeatedly.

A nuanced reading of the veil in *The Holy Woman* treats it as a fluid, polyvalent signifier that shifts meaning across Zarri Bano's life—moving from coercive marker under feudal-patriarchal power to a possible site of self-fashioning and moral authority. This trajectory aligns with broader scholarly suspicions that veiling in modern Muslim literature operates not as a unified symbol but as a palimpsest layered with power, tradition, and resistance (Mernissi, 1991; Ahmed, 2021). In Shahraz's narrative, the veil encodes competing regimes of authority: it marks patriarchal control over female bodies in the early episodes of Zarri Bano's life—where modesty is weaponized to discipline desire, mobility, and social presence—yet it also becomes a site where the protagonist negotiates self-possession, inner resolve, and professional autonomy as she navigates marriage, education, and social expectation. Leila Ahmed's work on women and Islam provides foundational material on how modesty, public visibility, and gendered space are culturally constructed within Muslim societies, offering a comparative approach for Zarri Bano's experiences.

Framing the veil through Islamic feminist discourse illuminates a productive tension between oppression and empowerment encoded in Zarri Bano's experiences. Early chapters often present the veil as a coercive technology of feudal or patriarchal surveillance—an instrument that reserves female agency for the male gaze and institutional gatekeepers of virtue. This is consonant with Mernissi's critique of the social architecture that polices female modesty as a means of preserving male prestige and social order, rather than enabling real female agency. Yet Shahraz's later scenes reframe veiling as a consciously chosen practice that Zarri Bano can appropriate—turning modesty into a public, ethical stance and a form of self-respect rather than mere compliance. This shift echoes how veiling and modesty are read not as inherently liberating or oppressive but as cultural dynamism that can be remade to secure personal dignity and moral authority.

Early veiling is inseparable from coercive social controls—family and community norms policing sexuality, mobility, marriage prospects, and public honor. As the narrative progresses, veiling becomes something Zarri Bano can redefine as a legitimate space for self-respect, education, and professional identity. This mirrors Mernissi's discussions of veiling as a power-labric that can be repurposed for dignity within certain religious-patriarchal grammars, though the text remains morally ambivalent about whether such re-appropriation fully liberates women or merely repositions them within a different set of constraints.

Shahraz's protagonist Zarri Bano re-codifies the veil as a means of superiority from the spatial boundary it conceptually and conventionally implies for women. It is the veiled persona of Zarri Bano which enlightens her so much that she challenges and questions her former liberal personality. Her veiling fundamentally challenges the vanity she possessed initially and which was no more than a locus, serving the sexually charged gaze of men. When Sikander sees her for the

first time at the *mela* (a funfair), she can feel "the pressure" of his gaze (Shahraz, 2001, p. 13). Then again, twice during the *mehndi* (temporary body art created by applying a paste from the henna plant and the tradition of applying this art) ceremony of Ruby, Zarri Bano feels the burden of Sikander's gaze on her unveiled body making her feel embarrassed and conscious. His gaze is symbolically representative of the male gaze that constantly scrutinizes, stares at and follows the female figure in a patriarchal social setup. Here Shahraz is sharp about who looks and who is looked at. In this context spatial veiling which comes across as architectural veils such as courtyards, women's quarters and screens, double as the cloth veil. They choreograph routes, restrict encounters, and script "proper" timing for women's visibility. However, when shrine visitors venerate Zarri Bano, the veil both invites and forbids the gaze. She is elevated yet unapproachable—seen but not met. The paradox reveals the veil's power to magnify a woman's symbolic value. Men interpret and authenticate the meanings of female veiling—religious leaders, landlords, and fathers. Women lived motives are often overwritten by male exegesis. Zarri Bano therefore adorns her burqa once again feeling confident and comfortable in it. In contrast, in another instance in the novel, she again feels robbed of comfort and her privacy when Ibrahim Musa chances to see her without her veil in his house in Cairo, "her arms rose and crossed over her chest, shielding herself from him and his male gaze" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 203). She feels "naked" under his gaze. For Zarri Bano wearing a burqa or veil is her recourse to protecting herself from the wandering male gaze, thereby refusing to be an object of it.

This scene enables readers to understand and appreciate how for some women, the veil signifies agency and empowerment. It provides them with control over their bodies and how they are perceived in public spaces, especially in patriarchal societies where women's visibility often invites unwelcome scrutiny. In such cases, the veil can act as a shield, protecting women from societal judgment and objectification. Conversely, for others, it becomes a symbol of protection imposed by society, restricting their agency under the guise of safeguarding their dignity. Al-Sudeary (2012) through her analysis of the novels of two Saudi female writers signifies how the veil protects Muslim women from the male gaze saving them from having to put up with appearances (p. 546). The dynamics between veiling and feeling of safety is also discussed by Hoodfar. The veil according to Al-Sudeary must be seen as a medium that affords women the entitlement of sanctity and respect. Furthermore, veiling then becomes a woman's act of taking power and control into her own hands and shunning the male gaze (Al-Sudeary, 2012, p. 547).

The Holy Woman portrays the veil "from within a different system of codification". This system "acknowledges the power that the gaze can play and deliberately refuses to allow this gaze any power over women's self-worth" (Al-Sudeary, 2012, p. 547). As Zarri Bano remarks to Jane, "The veil has given me a sense of my self-worth, respect and dignity … it has freed me from vanity. I never thought it would be easy but I have been able to shed myself of the trappings of female vanity" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 284). For Zarri Bano her burqa blesses her with a new kind of freedom and a feeling of self-respect.

Zarri Bano's emphatic defence of Islam and its tenets, even those relating to women, shows a new position of women emerging as a result of post 9/11 development and religious fanaticism. Shahraz does not consider religion to be the cause of women's persecution but feels that customs and misinterpretation of religion are responsible for this mess. For Zarri Bano the veil assumes the role of an agency through which she can move about and function without male protection or chaperoning, becoming physically and psychologically more mobile, sentient and free. The novel refuses a simple binary that veil equals oppression and unveiling freedom. It shows shades of agency. Women adopt veiling to avoid harassment, negotiate movement, or gain moral credit in a conservative milieu—using the rules to bend the rules. Timed excursions, coded letters, alliances

with sympathetic relatives, all suggest alternative circuits of power under the veil. Female characters like Zarri Bano invest the veil with devotional meaning rather than mere patriarchal compliance, complicating a purely secular critique. Through her depiction of Zarri Bano, Shahraz allows piety to be sincere even while showing how it is instrumentalized. Zarri Bano's evolving relationship to the veil intersects with questions of ethics, public responsibility, and women's leadership. The veil, in its later configurations, becomes entangled with Zarri Bano's educational ambitions, work, and social critique, suggesting that modesty can be a virtue associated with intellectual seriousness and civic engagement rather than a passive ritual.

Shahraz's treatment of the issue of veiling in *The Holy Woman* signifies her endeavour to bring into focus how Muslim women feel about the veil free from Orientalist misconceptions and obligations. As she states, "My views, as demonstrated in my novel through the heroine, Zarri Bano, show that many Muslim women in the West, including in Britain, regard the hijab as a form of freedom from vanity – definitely not a form of oppression" (Hasan, 2016, p. 178). Writers and thinkers who advocate for the veil often challenge the one-dimensional, often negative portrayals perpetuated by Western media. They point out that the practice is not monolithic but deeply contextual, varying across cultures, individuals, and circumstances. The hijab, abaya, or veil is, therefore not a burden for most women but rather a choice -- for the right to go about their lives with dignity, purpose, and independence. Whether approached from a religious, cultural, or feminist perspective, these writings underscore the role of the veil as a powerful symbol of identity, resistance, and empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The future of the veil is a dynamic interplay of cultural, religious, and global elements in which the very diverse interpretations and discourses debated in this article are projected. The new focus is going to be individual agency, which is making the veil more and more a personal choice rather than something imposed by society. It might also empower women to reclaim the veil as an authentic expression of faith, identity, and autonomy-- free from the constraint of both patriarchal and orientalist narratives, and as depicted by Shahraz in *The Holy Woman*. Muslim writers and scholars should be at the forefront of the change by continuously challenging the reduced, monolithic portrait of the veil in Western discourse. Their efforts to amplify the voices of Muslim women may dismantle stereotypes and reposition the veil as a symbol of resilience and self-determination, rather than oppression. This reclamation of narrative will likely foster greater understanding and respect for the veil's cultural and spiritual dimensions on a global scale.

The veil, whether in the Arab region, South Asia or other regions of the Muslim world, could take on varied manifestations as its form and practice change with each generation and the increasingly globalizing influences surrounding them. Younger generations could therefore be found to be retaining much from their cultural heritage but expressing this in hybrid forms of modesty that blend traditional acts of modesty with modern aesthetics to create fluid expressions of identity reflective of a more interconnected world. On the other hand, legal and social structures may evolve to safeguard the rights of women to wear, or not to wear, the veil, especially in areas where it has been politicized, prohibited, or forced. This might lead to a better balance of gender and acceptance of the veil as a highly individualistic, rather than a political act. Moreover, with growth in cross-cultural dialogue, it is likely to see the degradation of the Western narratives that further stigmatize the veil. Increased exposure through diverse perspectives may lead to well-informed opinions about the veil, thus extricating associations of oppression by framing it in a light that ascribes legitimacy towards religious and cultural identity.

The veil's future will be shaped in an increasingly digital world where Muslim women are already reclaiming their narratives online. Digital activism provides a powerful medium for challenging stereotypes, creating solidarity, and experimenting with new formations of identity and meaning. As these narratives gain momentum, they will contribute to a more nuanced global understanding of the veil, affirming its complexity and adaptability. Ultimately, it is in this ability to be more than its reductive interpretation that the veil will survive: as a metaphor for fluidity and empowerment, it will persist as a badge of the resiliency and agency of the wearer, symbolizing the richness of meaning by which Muslim women, scholars, and communities invest in an increasingly fluid world.

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