

## **A Feminist Turned Holy Woman: Image of the Veiled Muslim Woman in Qaisra Shahraz's Novel *The Holy Woman***

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### **Abstract**

Given the emphasis of contemporary Western discourse on the veil as a major problem for the Muslim woman, the fiction written by Qaisra Shahraz throws a challenge to the negative perceptions of the Islamic practice of veiling. This paper selects Qaisra Shahraz's novel *The Holy Woman* (2001) to offer a concerted response to the liberal tendencies which invest heavily upon the veil as a potent category of analysis in terms of assessing a Muslim woman's marginal status in the society. This analysis is developed round the theoretical framework provided by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1986). Mohanty's critical modal assists this study to examine the confluent cultural, spatial and temporal factors which determine the identity of a veiled Muslim woman. The literature review section of the paper holds that the historical and contemporary theories which view veil as an instrument of Islam's coercion, is a constructed image that does not represent the experience of all those who wear it. The consideration of complex discursive conditions that shape Zari Bano's dual and varied experiences of wearing *burqa* in *The Holy Woman* reveal that the wearing of veil expedites a woman's freedom, mobility and sense of security within the society where gaining control over women's sexuality is crucial for the maintenance of patriarchal and feudal system. The major argument of this analysis is that Islam does not operate as an independent phenomenon in the Muslim society and that a Muslim woman's oppression is instigated by the ignorance, renunciation and misinterpretation of Islamic principles regarding the rights of Muslim women. This study concludes that the veil carries immense empowering potentials for women within Islamic framework and becomes oppressive only when it operates under the rule of patriarchal, feudal and the geographical forces of a society.

**Key words:** *veil, burqa, <sup>1</sup> oppression, sexuality, liberal feminists*

### **Introduction**

You will be in seclusion – won't you-almost like a semi-*purdah*.<sup>2</sup> These are things that we have campaigned against, Zari Bano. We are still recovering from Zia-ul-

Haq's policies and their negative influence on women's lives. We have worked to get women out of their houses and to stand on their own two feet and have careers. And what you have done? Gone into seclusion yourself. (p. 174)

In one of Shahraz's most evocative references to the suspicion with which feminists working in Pakistan, tended to view "*pardah*" in the aftermath of the Zia-ul-Haq's regime, Professor Nighat Sultana in *The Holy Woman* expresses her instinctual abhorrence for Zari Bano's act of wearing *burqa* that seemed inimical to her "feminist beliefs and idealism"(p. 126). Professor Nighat Sultana undertakes two hours long journey to Zari Bano's residence at Tanda Adam with a hope to rescue her after hearing about her "veiling ceremony."<sup>3</sup> Above everything, Professor Nighat is distressed more by the "black burqa" which Zari Bano is conditioned to wear after becoming "The Holy Woman" of her clan. She rejects the "dark-cloaked vision" of her ex-pupil Zari Bano (known for her stylish personality) and condemns her for betraying her colleagues who are fighting against the forced veiling of women in the country. Tipped off by Zari Bano's membership of APWA (All Pakistan Women's Association) and strong feminist commitments, Professor Nighat is strongly agitated at her for allowing this catastrophe to happen in her life. In response to all the offers of emotional, physical and legal supports given by her university professor, Zari Bano puts an unusual demand before her: "Professor Nighat, you can devise a new title for your research and fieldwork for your postgraduate students – based on me . . . 'A feminist turned Holy Woman'"(p. 174).

Therefore, this study is a reply to Zari Bano's call and takes the first part of its title "A feminist turned Holy Woman" – from the words spoken by Zari Bano in *The Holy Woman*, which provides with a proleptic insight into the topic which this paper addresses: How Zari Bano's transition from a liberal feminist to a practicing Muslim woman embodies and/or challenges the popular feminist ideology that holds veil as an impediment to the empowerment and participation of a Muslim woman within the public sphere of the society?

The study aims to highlight significance of the social context (along with its cultural differences, religious orthodoxies, class hierarchies and rural/urban variances) in order to suggest that the veil is not oppressive in all contexts, nor does it hinder or challenge a woman's participation in social and public life. Therefore, it is the context and ideology within which it is observed that subjugates a female while barring her meaningful interaction in the social world. In doing so, this paper develops a qualitative analysis while recuperating the empowering potentials of the veil.

## Theoretical Framework of the Study

This paper deconstructs the image of a veiled Muslim woman presented in *The Holy Woman* from the intersectional perspective developed mainly through the reading of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's canonical article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1986). Concentrating on the diversity and range of social dynamics that influence the formation of the category of "Third World Woman," Mohanty (1986) highlights the role of three broad problematic presumptions which acclimates the Western discourse to the anti-veiling apologies. First, within Western scholarship "Third World Women" is constructed as a monolithic and homogeneous category indistinguishable by their racial, locational, ethnic or religious constitutions. Second, Mohanty criticizes the Western feminists disregard for the historical and local contexts while justifying the appropriation and singularity of the liberal ideas of freedom, agency and experience. Third, the totalizing ideas of shared oppression faced by "Third World Women."

Mohanty (1986) criticizes role of the above mentioned stereotypical reductions which equate oppression of a Muslim woman with her veiled identity. Such an assumption, according to Mohanty (1986), results primarily from the idea of "Islam as an ideology separate from and outside social relations and practices, rather than as a discourse that includes rules for economic, social and power relations within the society." This ideology, which Mohanty (1986) identifies as having roots in the philosophy of liberal humanism, limits itself to the critique of material practices (of which the Islamic practice of veiling is one) as signifiers of the overt oppression of a Muslim woman. A Muslim woman who wears veil is generally supposed to be backward, ignorant, sexually-constrained and a victim of family, patriarchal and religious violence. This inaccurate opinion of the veiled Muslim woman that Mohanty condemns generalizes all veiled Muslim women as vulnerable irrespective of their class, ethnicity, age, education, geographical location, historical specificity, financial standing and religious affiliation. What Mohanty (1986) proposes in her study is the need for analytical engagement with the apparently less explicit, but substantial forms of discursive exploitations as a defense strategy against the generalizing notions of the status of veiling women.

Consequently, this study exploits Mohanty's (1986) idea of "the strategic location of the category women vis-à-vis the context of analysis" to examine Zari Bano's varied experiences of wearing of the veil in *The Holy Woman*. This analysis invalidates the universal applicability of the liberal ideas of marriage, autonomy, freedom, sexuality, family, and gendered-division of space to the analysis of Muslim women wearing the veil. This paper refutes the major strand of liberal feminist ideology which

judges a woman's autonomy in terms of her unmediated access to public sphere and the associated assumption that the veil shrinks a Muslim woman's competency and independence in the social life.

## **Feminist Debates on the Veil**

The image of a veiled Muslim woman has long been a key subject of the mainstream Western discourse and the feminist debates which revolve around the status and position of a female in the Muslim world. However, as an effect of the US led military intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 attacks, more specifically the last two decades are witness to the accelerated international attention which the Muslim veil has gained (Riaz, 2012). Theoretically, feminism encounter with the veil revolves around both positive and negative features of the Islamic ideals of veiling. Speaking about the duality of feminist engagements with veil, Amber Fatima Riaz in her work *Architectures of the Veil: The Representation of the Veil and Zenanas<sup>4</sup> in Pakistani Feminists' Texts* (2012) says, "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"(p. 3).

The ideology of the veil as a symbol of Muslim woman's exploitation is challenged by a number of feminist theorists (both Muslim and non-Muslim), who attend to the politics of spatial differences in women's experiences and the structures of hierarchies created by these differences. Katherine Bullock in her study *Rethinking Muslim Woman and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (2002) contends that the perception of the veil as an applicator of oppression for a Muslim woman is majorly inspired by "liberal concepts of individualism, equality, liberty, and oppression" (p. xvi). Mostly, the ideological construction of the veil as an intrinsically oppressive practice largely remains unsubstantiated by the experiences and lives of Muslim women who wear the veil. This is particularly the case with Riaz's (2012) analysis of the fictional portrayal of veiled Pakistani women, where she questions the perception of monolithic category of a Muslim woman by establishing the binaries of rural/urban, modern/traditional, ethnic/religious, educated/uneducated within the social setup of the Pakistani society. Whether a Pakistani woman lives in a cosmopolitan city or some remote rural area, whether she comes from some feudal background or is a member of the tribal clan, her life is generally ruled by a system of patriarchy (Riaz, 2012; Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987). Thereby, within this context of the multiple and contradictory positioning of a Pakistani woman "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" (Riaz, 2012, p. 40).

Historically, the liberal feminist perception of the veiled body of a Muslim woman as the most visible sign of the exploitation and oppression which a woman suffers under Islamic rule and traditions was also adopted by a large section of Pakistani feminists in the wake of the 1970s and 80s. In Pakistan, the slogan of “chador and chardewari”<sup>5</sup> was popularized during Zia’s regime to restrict women’s mobility and participation in the public life. According to Shaheed and Mumtaz (1987), almost 82% of Pakistani women were already observing the *purdah* norms of the society; therefore, government’s popularization of the Islamic norms of dress code did not change the lived realities of their daily lives. While simultaneously as a reaction to Zia-ul-Haq’s policies of Islamizing the country, a large number of women (mostly elite, urban and western-educated) working for the liberation of Pakistani women held the ideal of veil with suspicion. Therefore, the overt resistance which the leading feminists showed towards the institutionalization of women’s dress in the country was particularly detrimental to the development of an effective feminist movement in Pakistan. Since, their challenge to Zia’s brand of the dress code was perceived as a challenge to Islam itself. This situation led to the creation of great controversy. On the one hand, it distracted the attention of feminists from the real problems and issues which were responsible for the large scale disempowerment of Pakistani women, while on the other hand, their adoption of liberal ideals of dressing (an act of defiance to the male dominance) blurred their vision towards those liberating potentials of veil for a Pakistani woman which Riaz (2012) identifies as giving her the power “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, *burqa*, has the potential to be used as a politically strategic tool of negotiation and compromise” (p. 72).

### **Analysis of *The Holy Woman***

In its representation of the image of veiled Muslim women in a Pakistani society, the narrative of *The Holy Woman* draws upon complex categories of modernity, tradition and patriarchal forces, most specifically within the rural context of Pakistani society. Divided into two parts, the plot of *The Holy Woman* moves forward in a diachronic manner to narrate two different phases of Zari Bano’s life, which are remarkable for her contrasting response to the issue of the veil: first, as an active member of APWA (All Pakistan Women’s Association) who pursues a liberal lifestyle, Zari Bano views veil as a symbolic execution of her liberty: “The *burqa* slithered over her head, her shoulders and down to her feet. Sakina then fixed the hood over Zari Bano’s hair, planting it firmly in place so that it only showed a small triangle of the bride’s face. Zari Bano stood frozen in *burqa*, dehumanized” (p. 144). Second, with her sound understanding of

Islam, which she gains in her role as the “Holy Woman,” her initial repulsion for veil converts into her willing acceptance: “I cannot live without it. The veil has given me a sense of myself worth, respect and dignity. Above all it has freed me from vanity” (p. 284).

The main plot of the novel revolves around Zari Bano, who is confronted with a crisis in her life after the death of her only brother, Jaffer. The action of the *The Holy Woman* takes place for the most part in Tando Adam and Chiraghpur, the two remote villages of the interior Sindh, Pakistan. The story begins with the details of a *mela*<sup>6</sup> held on the outskirts of Chiraghpur. This description of the *mela* is first in the series of the events through which the narrative establishes the rural world of the novel as a space organized round the division of public and private space. Riaz (2012) reinforces this public/private dichotomy of the Pakistani society by referring to Nasra Shah’s statistics of “82% of women in rural areas and 47% in urban areas follow *purdah* customs . . . 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” (p. 10). The *mela* as a public space features not only the traditional life of its village folk, but the absence of women from this festive event marks out the place as the men’s world where a female holds a secondary status. The narrator cynically reports it as a recreational event, arranged mainly for the male gathering of the village. It is also the site where the central female protagonist of the novel, Zari Bano is first seen. Being the granddaughter of the village head, her presence in the *mela* especially in the total absence of any other young female is the proof of the freedom which Zari Bano, the female protagonist of *The Holy Woman* enjoys: “for it was not common or socially acceptable for young women to join openly in all male-set of activities” (p. 12). It is also indicative of her superior social class. Her modern appearance is primarily conceded by her feudal family as an assertion of their family gentility and class superiority. By setting a sharp contrast between Zari Bano’s liberal and bold appearance with the traditional and secluded lifestyle of the village women, the novelist here seems to validate Mohanty’s (1986) idea of heterogeneous identities of the Muslim women. However, women like Zari Bano “leaving the confines of their home for education, work or any other purpose . . . form only a small minority whose privileges stem from their class backgrounds and all the attendant opportunities” (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987, p. 22). As in the course of narration, the female populace of the village is mainly portrayed as plain and uneducated, with the only exception of Firdous who is the daughter of their housekeeper, Fatima. However, she can neither compete with Zari Bano in her looks nor in education or family background. The lives of the village women are projected as confined to the four walls of their houses and spent in

housekeeping. The liberty which Zari Bano enjoys with her mobility in the restricted space is antithetical to the Western analytic assumption regarding third world women as “an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions” (Mohanty, 1986).

Zari Bano’s modern demeanor, therefore, within the rural scenario projects her as an independent figure which enjoys mobility within a place that particularly disapproves any unnecessary movement of women outside their houses. The uncovered head of Zari Bano particularly suggests her inclination towards the modern, urban lifestyle on account of ignoring the “convention of covering her head in a public place amidst group of men” (p. 12). Jaffer’s advice, however, given to her elder sister as a step to avoid bad aspersions on her character is equally significant in terms of contrasting her liberal ideals with the traditional mindset of her family. Jafar warns her sister: “You look so wanton! It creates a very bad impression. Not only of you, but of us and our father. Only naughty women do that sort of thing” (p. 13). The fact of a family’s honor woven round a female’s chastity is also pointed out by Shaheed & Mumtaz (1987): “Pakistani culture dictates that all ‘decent’ women remain in their homes and only venture forth completely covered and unrecognizable. Women who do leave their homes without a veil are categorized by the society as either ‘indecent’ or too poor to be of consequence” (p. 30). It is for this reason that Jafar protests against Zari’s assertion of her individuality as an act which is more likely to alienate her from her family and community. The opening of the novel is further important on account of putting Zari Bano in an unpredictable situation. While Zari Bano is enjoying the festivities of the fair, quite unexpectedly one of her suitors (who is expected to visit her family in the evening) shows up in the *mela* and the two end up in the spell of first sight love. Zari Bano’s love for Haroon is fomented by the freedom of movement she enjoys. Though, the narration visibly hints at Haroon’s anxiety over her unconventionality, his fascination appears to be primal aroused by the exceptional facial and bodily attraction of the protagonist. The hard stares of Haroon make Zari Bano’s body conscious of her spatial surroundings and she hurriedly leaves the place. The opening of the story within this particular setting seems to be suggestive of the conventional social ideology according to which the body of a woman irrespective of her education, family background and ideas of liberty remains subject to the public scrutiny.

Subsequently, the narrational passage from Zari Bano’s unconventional appearance in the outer space to her meek presence within the private space of the house reveals the transience and complexity of a woman’s identity which may alter with time and place.

According to Shaheed & Mumtaz (1987) “women have identities other than gender and it is in these identities that they differ . . . their struggle for their rights as women has to run concomitantly with their struggles on other fronts, notably that of their class-identity” (p. 151). The public image of Zari Bano as a woman with a strong personality gets weakened inside the inner space of the house where her father, the feudal landlord rules the household. Regardless of Zari Bano’s urban brought up and strong feminist commitments; falling in love with Haroon is interpreted as a sign of overt rebellion against the authority of her father. As a handsome and rich business tycoon, Haroon’s proposal appears to be a perfect match for Zari Bano in terms of looks, age, wealth, education and family status. However, unfortunately Zari Bano’s act of choosing Haroon as her life partner prior to the approval of her father is something totally unacceptable for Habib (Zari Bano’s father) as he claims “I am the head of the family and I (emphasis in original) will decide what is good for my daughter” (p. 23). Her desire to marry Haroon infuriates him to the point that he threatens his wife by saying: “If you encourage my daughter to marry this man against my wishes, I will divorce you on the spot, Shahzada-not once, not twice, but thrice” (p. 47)! His feudal ego cannot forgo her daughter’s liberal ideal of courting instead of submitting to his father’s traditional authority. Thus, Jaffer’s tragic death provides him with an excuse to refuse Haroon’s proposal. After losing the only male heir of his family fortune, Habib dismisses Zari Bano’s passionate pleas to accept Haroon’s proposal by saying “there will be no marriage for you, my daughter. Instead, there will be a ceremony of a different kind. We have decided that you should become a *Holy Woman*, a *Shahzadi Ibadat*” (p. 79). The act of arranging a veiling ceremony for her young female protagonist is not merely a fictitious ploy, but appears as a critique of a woman’s marriage to the Holy Quran which is actually practiced by the feudal lords of the landowning families in Pakistan. While counting multiple victims of this tradition, Mazhar (2003) exposes the actual motive behind such an arrangement:

A large number of feudals in Sindh had married their daughters to the Quran. The ceremony took place after the girl of the family was asked to take a bath, after which a Quran was put before her as the men folk apologized to her for the ritual which would condemn the girl never to get married but to read the Quran every day. In Sindh, Shabbir Shah’s sister, ex-minister Murad Shah’s sister and two daughters, three daughters of Mir Awwal Shah of Mattiari, daughters and sisters of Sardar Dadan and Nur Khan of the Lund tribe, nieces of Sardar Ghulam of Maher tribe, and the daughters of the Pir of Bharchundi Sharif,

were all married to the Quran to prevent their share of the land going to them and thus avoid redistribution of land.

Jaffer's uncanny death at the time when Zari Bano has already lost her heart to Haroon seems appropriate in relation to the narrative's interrogation of a Pakistani woman's inferior status within the feudal system. Even after the adoption of modern lifestyle and propagation of the liberal values, Pakistani women remain subordinate to male power on account of the long standing traditional pre-Islamic attitudes toward's women's role in the society (Ahmed, 2009). Habib falsely manoeuvres Zari Bano to enter the life of celibacy and asceticism in the pretext of Islam although it is against the teachings of Islam to renounce marriage for gaining spiritual elevation. As Rizvi (1994) in his study of sexual morality in Islam points out that Islam acknowledges marriage as a positive asset for a person to increase the faith and to safeguard the chastity. Therefore, the falling back of the most educated and modern female of Baba Siraj Din's clan who wears urban dresses and on "whose head *duputa*<sup>7</sup> never stayed" into adhering drab patriarchal patterns of behavior as soon as she becomes the "Shahzadi Ibadat" seems to suggest the rigid and prescriptive power that the feudal family has over the life of a daughter. Zari Bano's ultimate submission to her father's will falsify the liberal feminist idea which measures a woman's independence in terms of the choices she has regarding her body image and access to public space. The feudal system uses veil as a tool to consolidate its power, which is obvious "from the uneven distribution of the practice of *purdah* in Pakistan, where the strongholds are the feudal families of Punjab and Sindh and tribal Balochistan and NWFP" (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987, p. 29). The veiling ceremony of Zari Bano takes place in her ancestral village whose entire social fabric is structured around the *purdah* norms of the society. Chiraghpur and Tanda Adam are the places where women do not face any threat to their sexualities merely by covering their heads. However, the village folk is taken by surprise and shock upon learning that Zari Bano, the granddaughter of the village head in her role of "Shahzadi Ibadat"<sup>8</sup> would wear a black *burqa* for the rest of her life. Against her reputation as a modern and fashionable figure, everyone vouches her "veiled" status as an execution of her freedom.

At her veiling ceremony, for the first time in her life Zari Bano puts on a *burqa*. It becomes an utterly traumatic experience for her, as she wants to rip off the black cloak. Frustratingly, she faces the issue at the point in her life after she has understood and fought women's oppression in the society, but as yet is powerless to fight her personal oppression. Her early repulsion for *burqa* arises from the fear that *burqa* will depersonalize and confine her to the four walls of the house. Zari Bano knows that her

veiling ceremony does not hold any validity in Islam; however, she is blackmailed to marry the holy Quran in order to keep the family fortune within the family. She is denied the right to marry and to get the fixed share of inheritance which are those of the most fundamental rights that Islam accords to a woman. This orthodoxy of feudal thought bypasses the Islamic ideology of female equality. According to Patel (2003) “Unfortunately in Pakistan, not only has religion been politicized, but pseudo-religious interpretations are put forward to exploit and perpetuate un-Islamic laws, practices and norms. Today’s clergy-oriented feudal Islam is dominated by obstructionist attitudes, which misinterpret Islam” (p. 24). The speech which Habib Khan makes while addressing the guests present at the veiling ceremony of her daughter represents this typical feudal mentality which uses the religious discourse as a cover to legitimize its female violence and exploitation. Certainly, Zari Bano is forced to wear *burqa* as a measure to reduce her chances of encountering a member of the opposite sex (which may otherwise prove fatal to her oath of perpetual celibacy). Her agonizing sense of oppression is powerfully conveyed through an image of the caged bird who is deprived of any freedom:

I woke up to find that books, feminism, campaigns and education are utterly useless against the patriarchal tyranny of our feudal landlords. Stupidly, I had convinced myself that as an educated, urban, upper-class woman, I was different from those “poor” women, lower down the strata of our society, who had to do as they were told. “I found out, however, that in the end, we all are in the same pingra- a Birdcage to which our fathers and elders hold the key. (p. 171)

Unfortunately, her feminist ideals fail to provide her any real help or solution to escape her oppression. So, she cries out in agony as she pinches up “a fold of the *burqa* in front of Sakina with this cloth, Zari Bano is dead . . . I have been stripped of my identity and a stranger is taking my place” (p. 146). Sister Sakina, the Holy woman from a neighboring village is especially invited to help her get into the new role. When, Zari Bano tells her that it seems dehumanizing to hide her body in a shapeless cloak which may conceal her autonomy. In response to Zari Bano’s concerns, Sister Sakina’s comments bring out the cultural and religious value of the veil:

Female modesty and the general veiling of women is part of our faith and culture, as you know. Therefore, this is no different garment than that worn by any other Muslim woman, say in Iran, for example. They have been wearing these since the revolution –ordinary women, who wear it

outside for their modesty. Here in Pakistan we have always had the *burqa*. It's just that you have never worn it before and it has gone out of fashion somewhat, lately. The *chador* has replaced it. Therefore you're bound to find it a little strange at first. (p. 144)

In reality, her revulsion towards the "black garment" stays for a very short period of time till she gets the positive experience of wearing it in the public space. As an attractive young woman, her female body was as an object of sexual attractiveness for men. With the passage of time Zari Bano's veiled body shields her body from catching the unwarranted sexual attention of the strangers. She says, "When I am in front of strange men, not that I come across many as they all dutifully keep a respectable distance. The old vain Zari Bano drew whistles from men, this one draws courteous respect" (p. 382). Additionally, the *burqa* relieves her from the arduous routines of normative feminine dressing and self-beautification. She takes her earlier obsession for glamorous make-up, alluring jewellery, and clothing as "unnecessary" details of feminine demeanor. So, the *burqa* functions to minimize a problematic aspect of her life-her feminine beauty as she says: "the veil has given me a sense of my self-worth, respect and dignity. Above all it has freed me off from vanity. I never thought that it would be easy, but I have been able to shed myself of the trappings of female vanity" (p. 284). The "sanctuary" of *burqa* enables her to focus more on her work than to the superficial details of her self-image. In this context, her veiled identity, especially, becomes empowering in its annihilation of liberal ideals of what makes her an attractive woman. Zari Bano's choice to keep her veiled identity seems to hinge upon Mohanty's (1987) critique which unsettles the universal cogency and cross-cultural applicability of Western concepts of freedom and agency.

Immediately after the veiling ceremony, Zari Bano travels to Egypt in her pursuit of getting the knowledge of Islam at Cairo's Al-Azhar University. Her years of learning and time spent in the company of religious scholars bring great change in her life as she develops the correct ideas about the Islamic ideal of female modesty. Zari Bano's image as an educated woman who travels around the world in her veil challenges the liberal presupposition of the homogenous oppression of the veiled Muslim woman, labeled as "religious (read: not progressive), family-oriented (read: traditional), legally unsophisticated (read: they are still not conscious of their rights), illiterate (read: ignorant), domestic (read: backward)" (Mohanty, 1987). The *burqa* offers Zari Bano the possibility to separate and criticize only those traditional norms and patriarchal ideologies that view women as property and oppress them in the name of Islam. While leading one of the religious seminars held regularly in the

village *madrasa*, Zari Bano draws her students' attention to the potential oppression of women within the patriarchal family. For instance on the issue of a woman's right to inheritance in Islam, she complains against the patriarchal mindset of her society by saying "fathers can go ahead and aggressively disclaim their daughters' rights, by harping on how much they spent on them" (p. 379). Towards the end of the seminar, Zari Bano is once again interrogated regarding her *burqa*-wearing. The reappearance of the *burqa* debate at this point in her life where she is capable to chair religious seminars suggests that the more Zari Bano becomes aware of the subtleties of Islamic principles the more steadfastly she observes veil. Therefore, in response to her cousin Gulshan's question, she says "It makes my life so simple and carefree. I don't have to worry what I am wearing underneath, or about my hair and so on. It is an amazing experience . . . now I feel . . . vulnerable without it" (p. 382).

Zari Bano's privileged social class makes it possible for her to travel locally and internationally and meet different women from all across the world. Zari Bano's visit to the Regent Park mosque in Central London overtly brings her "Under the Western Eyes." Her presence in London holds great significance in terms of overtly challenging the Western assumption of *burqa* as a symbol of controlled mobility of a Muslim female in public spaces. Jane Foster, an English journalist meets her at the London mosque and enquires her experience of wearing a *burqa*. After having seen an old picture of Zari Bano's university days "in a pair of Levi's with only a short blouse on top" (p. 284), her veiled image fidgets Jane Foster. Jane takes Zari Bano's black, loose *burqa* as a sign of her inferior religious status. Jane's straight forward question "I want to ask you whether you found it difficult to wear the *hijab*<sup>9</sup> at first and why did you do it anyway?" (p. 284) demonstrates all those biases of Western discourse which, according to Mohanty (1987) obstructs the development of a positive image of the Muslim woman who wears the veil. Zari Bano's personal experience of *burqa* gives her the strength to reprieve Jane's inquiry persuasively in the following words:

The veil has always perplexed and tantalized 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 women are forced to wear it by their menfolk . . . I can assure you, my friend in the current climate there are more women now in hijab, by their own free will than ever before. (pp. 284-285)

These suppositions, with which Zari Bano is acquainted too well, reveal the way Western discourse has generally characterized the image of a veiled Muslim woman. The veil is thereby seen both as an illiberal practice which is often taken by force, and as an oppressive experience which costs the Muslim woman her freedom of mobility. Zari Bano's personal experience of wearing *burqa* bears testimony to her words. As the "*Holy Woman*" of her clan, though Zari Bano starts wearing veil as a customary obligation. Yet, as the narrative furthers, Habib releases her daughter from the oath of perpetual celibacy. The cancellation of her presumed holy status ratifies her freedom to dress. However, contrary to everyone's expectations, Zari Bano continues to dress in her "black *burqa*." Her early liberal ideas put her under the stress to conform to ideal beauty standards, so that to look beautiful became the top priority in her life. Living in a society where a woman's physical appearance is always under scrutiny, Zari Bano's energies got consumed by the series of time-consuming regimens she would pass through before leaving the house, i.e. skin-cares, selecting an appropriate dress for the occasion, hair styling, subtle touches of make-up, beauty creams and so on. Moreover, to get an ideal slim figure she had to spend hours on sculpting body exercises together with strict diet control. With this realization of the tyranny which the false beauty myths put her into, wearing of *burqa* gets to be her personal choice. Her reason to wear *burqa* becomes a literal interpretation of Rizvi's (1997) theory of Muslim veil when he claims that "it compels men to focus on the real personality of the woman and de-emphasizes her physical beauty. It puts the woman in control of strangers' reaction to her (p. 33). Accordingly, for Zari Bano, the "*burqa*" acts as a concealer to cover up her exceptional physical beauty and privileged social class which used to set distances between her and the ordinary woman of the society. It allows her to take part in public life and meet Muslim women from around the world. Indeed, with her liberal ideals of freedom her efforts to fight for women's rights only permeated the elite, urban circles of the Pakistani society. Furthermore, the dress codes which these women follow hold significant attention. Though, they all dress modestly, however, their dressing lacks uniformity which belies the popular western idea of a monolithic dress being worn by the Muslim woman. Zari Bano's intimate encounters with these women further exemplifies that the desperation and the problems which the Muslim women face in their lives have nothing to do with what they wear nor does her struggles for women's rights stops with what she wears.

## Conclusion

The story of Zari Bano in *The Holy Woman* offers a sharp critique to the Western ideals of autonomy, choice, gender equality and free access to public life which in certain cases and circumstances gravitates a

liberal feminist in Pakistan more towards disempowerment than to its opposite. There exists strong links between a woman's physical appearance and her family's honor within the space segregated society of Pakistan. Therefore, the biggest threat to a women's autonomy comes from her own self "unprotected" visibility in public space. Consequently, the veiled body of a Muslim woman offers her a personal space which protects her from the harassment of male gaze-while participating in the public space which is typically assumed to be a male space.

The image of Zari Bano as a veiled Muslim woman in *The Holy Woman* negates the liberal assumption which holds *burqa* as an oppression and seclusion for a Muslim female, and typically, utilization of veil as a cultural sign and tradition that offers (and often has done so) patriarchy with a ploy to oppress Muslim woman in particular settings and circumstances. Zari Bano's feminist sensibility when couples with her sound understanding of Islam helps her to rationalize that the oppression she has faced as a veiled woman is not perpetuated by the modesty imperatives of Islam. On the contrary, it is intertwined with the structures of spatial, ethnic, class and gendered inequalities of the Pakistani society. Through her practical experience of the veil, Zari Bano commands honor and dignity for her intellect rather than for her physical appearance. Her adoption of veil does not bar her active participation in the social life, which belies the liberal notion of the seclusion of a veiled Muslim woman.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>A loose, black gown that covers body from head to toe, generally it is worn by Muslim woman while going out in the public spaces

<sup>2</sup>Literally curtain; used for both the physical veiling of women and the institution of segregating the sexes and secluding women

<sup>3</sup>The tradition of feudal families to marry the daughters with the Quran in order to avoid distributions of family fortunes outside the family by inheritance

<sup>4</sup>A part of the house where women reside

<sup>5</sup>Literally the veil and four walls; used to denote the approved confinement of women, their role in society, as well as their modesty

<sup>6</sup>A traditional fair held in the remote rural areas of Pakistan

<sup>7</sup>A lengthy scarf and an integral part of the national dress, worn covering the head and bodice in rural areas, but usually draped over shoulders in urban areas

<sup>8</sup>A woman who leads the life of perpetual celibacy and religious devoutness after being married to the holy Quran

<sup>9</sup>A piece of a fabric which covers the head and neck area worn in public by Muslim women

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