



**UNVEILING THE LIFE OF PURDAH NASHINS: A STUDY OF MUSLIM WOMEN
STRUGGLE IN INDIA FOR IDENTITY AND GENDER JUSTICE IN ANEES JUNG'S
WORK NIGHT OF THE NEW MOON**

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to examine through Anees Jung's work *Night of the New Moon*, those socio-cultural and religious practices which through interpretation or (mis)interpretation by the patriarchal Muslim community, have kept women at a subjugated position since time immemorial. It also attempts to look beyond the veiled faces of Muslim women, and to peep into their lives in order to bring to the forefront their stories of pain and struggle that they have silently been suffering from, due to their degraded status, lack of individuality and justice in their family and community in particular and society at large. This would be done by bringing forth their unheard voices through the narratives of the Muslim women that Anees Jung have recorded during her interviews with them, in various parts of India. Apart from this, the paper would also ponder over the struggle that Muslim women are fighting to regain their lost identity, position, rights and justice in society so that they can be uplifted and emancipated and their problems can be resolved for a better and more prosperous future of our country.

Keywords: Women identity, gender justice, patriarchy, emancipation.

Identity forms a very important aspect in the lives of every woman, irrespective of their caste, colour, creed, and religion, because of the fact that they are often being related to the concept of honour and chastity in our society. The underlying paradoxes between gender formation and an established identity as a man and woman is often a controversial and most debated issue in almost every culture and religion of our country. Categorizing the experience of domination and injustices

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by Muslim women and women of other religion under single homogenous group would do injustice to them, as women experiences differ across various religion, communities, and places. Therefore, the arising need to contest those generalizations which the Western feminists have often tend to universalize by disregarding the existing differences among women of the Third World Countries. But this does not allow us to completely disregard the criticisms from Western and non-Islamic countries regarding the fact of rigid patriarchal Islamic laws being one of the major reasons for the women subjugation in Islam. Due to all these factors, women rights have become “part of an ideological terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity are debated and where women’s appropriate place and conduct may be made to serve as boundary makers (Lughod 3).”

The modern Islamic criticism of its practices in general like purdah system, polygamy, debarring women from education and others and Muslim Personal Law in particular, by Islamic scholars and feminists’ highlights mainly towards the differences that exist in what the holy text, *The Quran* preaches and that which is misinterpreted and expounded to the society in the name of religion. The critics and scholars, therefore, emphasized to bring about reform in the predisposed gender-based roles determining the degraded women identity and status in society, in the education and rights and in their Muslim Personal Law which has often been biased in their decision regarding women. This slowly gave rise to Islamic feminism, which initially emerged as a movement in Muslim dominated countries like Arab, Egypt, Iran and other Muslim Middle East countries and then it began to spread and enter into India and other Third World Countries, challenging the hegemony of the patriarchal interpretations of the *Shariah* law, through which women have often been silenced. The basic methodology that they adopted to resolve women problems was to return to their religious text *Quran* and re-interpret it in the light of history, sociology, political, literary criticism and others. They have also tried to analyse it on the basis of their own experience of being a Muslim woman and have also raised questions on many rules and laws that are gender biased and have been formulated in such a way so as to hold high the patriarchal ideas and values, which have a very negative effect on women overall development. Thus, by emphasizing on re-examining *Quran* and comparing it with the sayings in *Hadith*, they are challenging those Muslims who believe that Islam does not impose any kind of violence and oppression against women in the name of Islam. Though this re-interpretation is not the permanent solution to end the atrocities against women in Muslim societies, yet this indeed one of the effective weapons to portray the clear picture of dominance by patriarchal Islamic society. The best part of Islamic feminists is that they have tried to bring about change by not blindly accepting the Western model of feminism, but by adopting new ways to bring change being within the Islamic framework.

Islamist women activists argue that defending women's rights is part of defending Islam itself against the corruption of its own ideas. They argue that Islamic precepts originally did not aim at subjugating women but were distorted by social and cultural norms that antedated Islam and persisted despite the spread of Islam. In this view, the

struggle for women's rights is thus also a struggle to restore Islam to its original form.
(Omayma 6)

But it has often been observed that whenever such kind of protests for reformation have been raised by women, most of the time they are forced to reject their own views and ideas by creating lots of social pressure and gender politics from within the community. In spite of so much pressure and repressive measures being adopted by the Muslim community to keep their women away from the center, women of the Muslim community have continued their effort to push themselves forward, either through protests or through the medium of writing. Their main aim is to create a better and healthier space for women within the Islamic sphere. In this light, Anees Jung's work *Night of the New Moon* have been useful because it portrayed not only the existing problems that Muslim women have been enduring silently but at the same time it also highlights those changes that Muslim women are welcoming in their lives and in their thinking, of the vagaries of the modern world. Therefore, based on this book of her we would see how Muslim women are being regulated by their patriarchal society and what effort they are making to bring changes in their lives and in the lives of future generations as well.

Unlike women of other religion, it is generally hailed that Muslim society is comparatively more patriarchal and conservative in approach towards women, because of the rigid nature of their religious texts and their personal laws which are mainly considered as gender biased. This is evident in the "male privilege of unilateral divorce, high fertility, the ubiquitous veil, and conformity to the strict confines of womanhood within a fundamental religious code (Hasan and Menon 2)." Various social structures and cultural and religious practices create an obstacle in the women advancement in the Muslim societies and it is only the identification and deconstruction and dismantling of such structures which can offer a better life and an enhanced social status to them. With regard to this, we find that an important tool adopted by the Islamic society to keep women suppressed is through the practice of veiling or wearing the burqa, leading to sex segregation which has been largely opposed by the Islamic feminist not only in India but in most of the Muslim countries around the world as well. Many Muslim women activists consider veiling as a symbol of oppression of women and have raised their voice against it, while a majority of women who are uneducated and still unaware about the concept behind introducing such a practice and its implementation on women, have accepted it blindly. This has given rise to two categories of Muslim women. One, who are uneducated and thoughtlessly accept the laws of *Shariah*, without even analyzing whether these laws are same as that being pronounced in the *Quran*, or they have been modified according to the situation and need of the male-driven Muslim community. Second, is the group of women who are educated and who do not sightlessly follow the religion. They have realized how laws of *Shariah* have been pronounced and with what purpose and so they are against the maintaining strict adherence to such laws and thus, raise their voices and emphasize on re-interpretation of *Hadith* and *Shariah* law according to the women perspective, to claim their denied rights in favor of those underprivileged Muslim women of our country and abroad, who are still living in darkness, unaware of the changes going on in this modern world. Therefore, to understand any practice that is being

imposed upon women, one needs to understand the genesis of its origin and the way in which it has been passed across generations.

Talking about burqa we find that, it initially started with the elite class Muslim families, for whom maintaining the honor and dignity of their family was one of their main priority. So, they started segregating the women from men, by asking them to practice purdah, so that the women, whom men generally considered as the honor and reputation of the family, can be protected from the outsider's gaze. The genesis of this practice can be understood, with respect to a parallel connection between the place of origin of Islam and its connection with the occupation of this place, because it has often been observed that the status of women in any country, community or religion is parallelly depended upon the progress and development of that society. Apart from this women status is also largely affected by the occupation of any particular area or region. For example, when we talk about Arabia, a Muslim dominated country, where Islam originated, there we find business and merchandise as the main occupation of people, which included taking "their goods on camel-back and carried on business in other countries (Subbamma 22). So, the women were mainly expected to stay back at home, confined within the four walls for their safety and maintaining of their honor and chastity. Thus, they began to be treated mainly as secondary objects, whose conditions were nothing better than the slaves. Moreover, during the conflicts and wars that took place during that time, women became easy victims for winning the war and thus they were often abducted and were used as slaves or concubines by the kings for their pleasures. Since then various regulations and imposition of values started to be attached to women identity and chastity, where it was mainly expected by the male members of the society that the women should remain confined within the veil or zenana, to protect them from both, men's gaze and abduction. Jacobson observed that "The concept of modesty (Sharm) is central to the ideology of purdah as well as to all other rules governing women's dress and behavior (Jacobson 187)." As a result, women thinking all these practices were for their welfare, began to accept and internalize them sightlessly, ignorant of the fact that such male imposed practices would hamper their individuality or identity. Thus, with time this tradition of wearing burqa and veiling became a part of universal social practice. Anees Jung in her "Foreword" also mentions it. She writes that:

Through the centuries, the rather mild injunctions to both sexes to be modest in dress and behavior have evolved into a strict system of segregation, restricting women's activities and movements, pushing them into spaces where living acquires the tone of martyrdom, where to be mothers, wives and daughters become sanctified, where being Muslim provides the halo. (Jung x)

This purdah system has been analyzed differently by different persons and its practice also depend largely on the place where a person is residing.

In Eastern cultures, hair is considered a sexual stimulant and covering head is a common practice in many Asian and African countries. In India, even Hindu women

cover their heads with *saries* in presence of elders and strangers. The Qur'an also suggests covering head though it is not very clear whether it is recommendatory or obligatory. The Muslim theologians, of course, consider it obligatory. (Engineer 129)

It is through burqa and veiling practice only, that women and men are segregated, victimized and are prejudiced against in the Islamic community and this becomes one of the greatest reasons also for women backwardness as well. Lots of restrictions are being imposed on Muslim women based on the concept of veiling, with enforcement of certain codes of conduct related to female reticence, chastity, and mobility, which mainly includes their dress, behavior, segregation of spaces between men and women, private and public and many others. This worsens the condition of Muslim women more, whose wishes, desires, choices are being stifled and buried within the four walls of a home, by devoiding them of those opportunities which women of other religion easily access for their progress and upliftment. It is burqa only which prevent them from getting educated, from them doing a job and from freely participating in community discussions and in social activities and protests. Nadia Yousef and Audrey. C. Smock examines that "Although the veil has become a symbol of respectability, the very logic of seclusion reflected negatively on the character and value of women (Yousef and Smock 39)". By continuously living in a secluded space, without any ray of light enlightening the dark shadows of mind, they have failed even in hearing their own inner voice and in understanding their own real self. Such pitiable have been the condition of most of the Muslim women. With the turn of the twentieth century and advent of modernity and globalization, Muslim women successfully made effort to emerge as a self-aware individual, claiming those rights which *Quran* provides them, but has been denied to them by those men who mis-interpreted it in the name of religion. They have begun to demand reforms with regard to women education, divorce including a change in triple talaq system, raising the age of marriage, providing them equal rights of inheritance, doing away with burqa system and several others, by being within the Islamic parameters. Anees Jung in the "Foreword" of her book also gives an example of one such college girl who follows Islam but for dealing with the problems that she faces as a Muslim girl in adjusting herself with the modern new world, she seeks resolutions by sometimes even going outside the framework of her faith. She says: "I am a modern woman. But that does not mean I should be immodest. I can fight a battle wearing a burqa (Jung x)".

This change in women thinking and awareness is something which Anees Jung noticed during her interviews with the Muslim women whom she personally met during her journey that she undertook, for writing this work of her. She met Jilani Bano, a writer, who narrates the problems that she encountered as being born as a woman in a Muslim family, with the author. She says how her mother permitted her to go out for pursuing education, but never appreciated her skill in writing stories and her going out to attend writer's meetings and conferences. So, for the happiness of her mother, she suppressed her wishes, which was a kind of purdah for her. Pointing towards the patriarchal hold over the Islamic society she raises question over the biased nature of her religion which easily victimize women more than men, through the strong religious hold and imposed regulations. She says how it is expected that only women should stay in the burqa, should not talk to

any man in public or go out alone, should not study in class with men and they cannot even think of going out of home for higher education and jobs. Their choices are hardly given any heed. "Aman can utter three words and separate her with a divorce. And if she remarries no one will respect her in society. If there is a case of adultery and a man and woman are caught, it is the woman who is held responsible (Jung 60-61)." Jilani being an educated and socially aware women have tried to bring out these realities through her writings to bring change in the social condition of women in large. She herself out of the fear of social indentures observed purdah and suppressed her desires until she married a husband of her choice, who understood and supported her in coming out of purdah and in fulling her desire as a writer. She says how even after being a writer, she abides by all the duties of a wife and mother according to Islamic rituals and beliefs. This pinpoints towards the transformation that both Muslim men and women are undergoing in their perspective of perceiving the religious dogmas, with awareness through modern education.

In the early times, when a woman used to become a widow, family pressure, accompanied by a life of seclusion made her life nothing better than hell. It was very difficult for women to survive and eke out a living, as going out and working with men outside was considered immoral by the society. So, they went on suffering silently the pangs of life, but nowadays, women have rejected the state of passive victim-hood and have started to join hands together under the banner of sisterhood for bringing about change in their own lives and lives of several such suffering women. Akbari is also one example of such a change, who instead of passively crying over her state as a widow, has used her skill in using needle and thread for earning her livelihood. She says that she learned that skill by just watching each other doing it. The time when the author met her in Lucknow, she found Akbari teaching the stitching skill that she learned to "500 women chikan workers who function as a family under the umbrella of an organization called SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Association. They have found a way to live and to work, and have gained a recognition for their crafts and themselves (Jung 102)." Like Akbari and Jilani Bano, Anees Jung's narrates several such stories of women, who themselves are making effort to seek their own identity and rights and are trying do away with gender injustices from their community for the betterment of Muslim women at large, through equal participation with men in job and education. Instead of depending completely upon the organizations and men for reforms, they themselves have started coming out crossing the boundaries, and thus have challenged the Islamic patriarchal society to review and reconsider the existing gender stereotypes, for the upliftment of Muslim women from their marginalized state in our country.

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