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The All Concealing Dress

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Abstract*

This paper attempts at a theoretical explanation of one form of *purdah* called *burqa,* by presenting an ethnographic case study of a women's Islamic school in Pakistan. *Purdah* may be defined as a cultural denomination of the English word "veil". This topical field has attracted a plethora of intriguing studies in the social sciences due to its socio-politico-religious aspects. El Guindi argues that the discourse on veil is predominantly influenced by Western-ideology feminists who regard it "as an aspect of patriarchies and a sign of women's backwardness, subordination, and oppression" (El Guindi 1999: 1). The present paper using and emic approach presents yet another dimension of this type of clothing. It establishes the hypothesis that *purdah* is symbolic of a form of religiosity that claims modesty. The argument is structured along three parts; starting with the significance of clothing and definition of the term *purdah* it moves on to the final part, the detailed explanation of this dynamic clothing.

1. Introduction

"Ninjas" is a metaphoric reference to women covered head to toe in black but without any warring qualities. The *ninjas* chosen for the present research, however, are different from the rest. With their six feet long sticks they are "the black brigade of the red mosque". With this public image, it was only normal that I was a bit frightened to enter the field, and mentally prepared for all sorts of reactions: rejection, aggression or skepticism. Well-prepared with my research proposal I went to discuss it with the *madrasah* authorities. A group of five or six bearded men sitting near the gate directed me to the place where the principal was, simultaneously warning me that masons soon would come to work. At that time I could not recognize the "warning" but it dawned soon after that I had entered into a world where the conception of *purdah* is if not entirely than significantly different from my own. I moved into the main courtyard and appreciated the *purdah* oriented architecture: windows with frosted glass and curtains to prevent outsiders from peeping inside; the lecture rooms with their small window openings to the room where male lecturers sat; the canteen with its rotating window to ensure minimal contact with the shopkeeper; I heard the announcement on the loud speaker requesting all "sisters" for "*purdah ka ahtamam*"[1] so that the masons could pass through. A hustle and bustle started soon after, most of the girls ran to hide themselves inside the nearest rooms, those who were in the way clad in black robes and covered head to toe, pulled a veil over their face. While everybody was repeating the announcement to every girl they came across, it was interesting to see how carefully each woman made sure that nobody among them appeared with their face unveiled in front of men. At the same time, no one told me to cover my face. After the men had passed through, however, the girls I were with at the reception commented "so you do not observe *purdah*!" Being covered head to toe myself I was quite surprised by this comment. My immediate response was "I do" only to know that this is not

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[1] It means to observe *shara'i purdah*, a pre-condition mentioned whenever there is a possibility of men/women encounter.

"shara'i purdah". Even before my actual research began, a set of messages thus was conveyed to me through these very first interactions: the very first announcement, the very first observation of the black *burqa* clad women and the glimpse of closed architecture showed me that there is a whole body of knowledge, values and practices that needs to be explored. There is a specific dress code that needs to be followed and the rules of which have to be observed by group members, while an "outsider" may not follow them. *Shara'i purdah*, expressed through black *burqa* and the face veil as its most prominent features, is the subject matter of the present paper.

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Fig. 1. The students standing in front of the *madrasah* with their sticks during a protest against demolishing of a mosque in the capital.   Photo: Saadia Abid

2. Theoretical analysis

Clothing poses an interesting aspect of social and cultural studies. Different people dress differently because dresses are culture-oriented and value-based and perform multi-faceted functions. There are professional dresses like the doctor's white gown, the lawyer's black coat; there are institutional dresses for example different colleges maintain a specific uniform as a dress code: there is pop-dress-culture, for instance, the jeans culture: there are religious dresses, the veiled Muslims the nuns with their headdresses, the priests with their robes; in all its manifestations it reflects occupation, status, affiliation to an ideology and worldview of the wearer; it is a marker of identity. In short, there is embedded a value system; we are encultured to wear a certain type of clothing.

Clothing, like all the other forms of material culture, is a reflection of the society and people among whom it is worn. It is not a mere cloth but a cloth worn in appropriation to a value system. The code of dress thus developed over a period of time corresponds to all the potent variants; culture and tradition, values and ideals, religion and rituals, ceremonies and celebrations, profession, gender and space etc. The conformity to this value system confirms an identity expressed through dressing. Dress, then operates as a means of "visual communication". This communication, argue Barnes and Eicher 1992: 1, takes place even before the "verbal" one to establish if communication is possible at all. This symbolic communication or interaction renders clothing "meanings" and consequently "the ways that people use and relate to the clothing as material culture becomes

meaningful" (Shirazi 2000: 115). The dress then like language becomes a characteristic peculiar to human beings who use them for "social dialogue" (Andrewes 2005: 20). Greybill and Arthur 1999: 9 stress this intrinsic characteristic of dress as an "effective means of non-verbal communication during social interaction" while discussing the female dress code of Mennonite communities.

As discussed above clothing and dressing performs numerous functions simultaneously, physical and symbolic, it helps conceal or reveal body contours; determine the social positioning and economic status of the wearer; is a marker of identity on both levels, individual and cultural thereby acts as a tool including or excluding membership to a group. The present paper discusses a particular type of clothing, that is "purdah", worn in relation to a particular ideology and its perceived functions. It also discusses the vital functions of dress; the visual communication (Barnes and Eicher 1992: 1); the formative function which requires the wearer to act in a culturally appropriate manner (Andrewes 2005: 3) and the "symbolic interaction", the transmission of signals between image management and image perception. In short, it will help determine the social life of clothing and its significance in a particular setting (Kaiser 1990: 39).

Derived from Persian, the word *purdah* literally refers to curtain; in clothing it refers to *burqa* or *chaadar*[2] used to conceal a woman's body most often including her face; while symbolically it means a division between male and female domain and also seclusion of women. *Purdah* may be considered as a cultural denomination of the English word veil, which besides meaning a curtain and to hide or to conceal, refers to Muslim women's head and body coverings. The northern parts of the sub-continent have been termed as the *purdah* zone by Mandelbaum, given the fact that "purdah practices are taken to be central elements of social life" in these regions (1988: 2). The *purdah* zone includes Pakistan, Northern India and Bangladesh, in particular. Here the gender systems manifest as *purdah-izzat* duo; *purdah* which is observed as seclusion and veiling of women is deeply inter-connected with men's honour or *izzat*. Since *purdah* as clothing has no uniform expression in the region, the paper concerns one particular type of dress *burqa*.[3] *Burqa*, again is manifested in various ways, what follows is the elaboration of the type of *burqa* worn by women in the Islamic schools following the Deobandi Hanafi School of thought.

The present research was inspired by two major aspects that emerged from the prior to field research review of the literature on the subject. One, that there is a remarkable lack of literature on the use of *purdah* by women in Islamic schools despite that fact that the practice is taken as conformity to the religious decrees by the Muslims of South Asia. Secondly, the stance of the veiled women on the subject has not adequately been addressed to. The aim of this study is to know the concept as comprehended by the natives and their position on the subject. As a native anthropologist I had easy access to the locale. My field work, however, took place during a period when the school's relation with the government were already deteriorating. This of course influenced the conditions of my inquiry in many ways. For instance, a lot of information was not easy to come by. As a consequence, opportunistic sampling was opted to cover all the variants of the school's inmate population; married/ single, principal/ teacher/ student and resident/ day-students. Thirty-five in-depth interviews along with three focused group discussions[4] helped to collect qualitative data for a detailed description and analysis of *shara'i purdah*.

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[2] *Chaadar* is a "two-dimensional" item made of "two or three yards of fabric" (Daly 2000: 134).

[3] *Burqa* was commonly worn in the olden times in the sub-continent by the women. It consisted of a long gown with just one appendage that covered the head and face, both.

[4] The original interviews and discussions in Urdu have been translated into English by the author.

The locale chosen for the purpose is Madrasah Jamia Hafsa in Islamabad which in itself proposed an interesting subject for research already then, not to mention subsequent events. The local participation of the women in this particular public sphere seemed to contradict *purdah*-seclusion theory. Madrassah Jamia Hafsa, the female Islamic seminary was established in 1992 as a sister branch of Jamiat ul Ulom al Islamia al Faridia (1984), both affiliated to the famous Lal Masjid (the red mosque) in Islamabad. Although the Red Mosque has ten and twelve other female and male seminaries respectively, within or in the outskirts of the capital, these two are the most prominent for three reasons; one, the centrality of their location within the capital, secondly the very large number of students who can be accommodated there despite comparatively smaller space and lastly, a controversial public standing which is owed to strong, organized protests against such government policies which in some way are related to religion.

Fig. 2.
The Jamia mosque popularly known as Lal masjid (the red mosque) due to its red colour edifice.

Photo: Saadia Abid

Madrasah Jamia Syeda Hafsa was established with an aim to spread religious knowledge to the girls. This claimed to answer to the needs of three interest groups: those women who seek religious knowledge themeselves, those men who want their wives, daughters, sisters, or mothers to learn in a secluded environment, and those parents who cannot afford to send their girls to other schools because of the high expenses this would entail. The *madrasah* is comparable to a boarding school, providing services to both, the day-students and the resident ones. The number of the latter far exceeds the former; out of a total of three thousand and five hundred students claimed by the authority only six hundred are day-students. All the women affiliated with the *madrassah* in any way follow the *purdah* rules which renders peculiarity to their dress. This is explained in detail in the following paragraphs.

If *purdah* is to be equated with the dress, then the primary task is to define and lay premises of what is to be included in it. Technically Andrewes divides the dress into three categories on the basis of the way they are stitched: "tailored clothes", "flat-cut clothes" and "wrapped up clothes". The present study deals with the "flat-cut clothes" which may be defined as "garments with no shape or lines". The cloth is sewn in a way that it loosely hangs over the body of the wearer and does not make any of the body curves and lines prominent (Andrewes 2005: 9). The primary

source for laying out the premises for such a dress is the Quran, the Muslim's Holy book. The oft-quoted verses in this reference include the following two:

> O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments (*jalabib*) over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft- Forgiving, Most Merciful (33:59).

> Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils (*khimar*) over their bosoms and not display their beauty ... (24:31).[5]
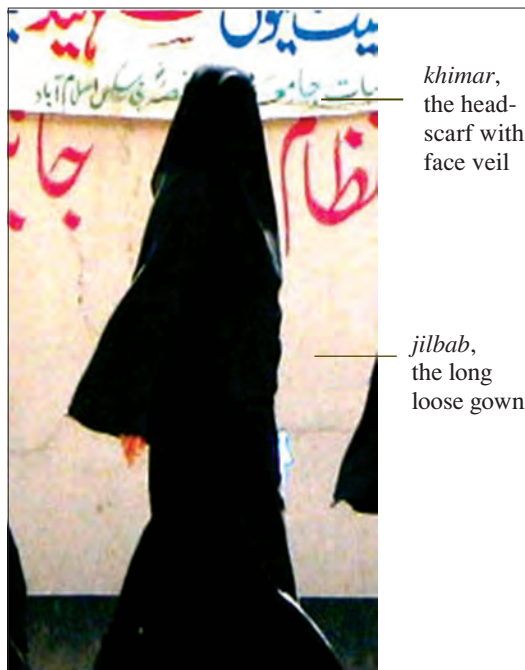
khimar, the head-scarf with face veil

jilbab, the long loose gown

Fig. 3. The *burqa*.
  Photo: Saadia Abid

The induction for dress code from the two verses is based on the use of words, *jilabib* plural of Arabic word *jilbab* and *khimar*. *Jilbab* is defined as a long loose garment or cloak that covers the whole body, head to toe, while *khimar* is synomynous to shawl or headscarf. Thus, a head scarf together with a loose outergarment should be fulfilling the criteria. However, what is incredible is that following these verses they end up wearing a uniform dress, *burqa*; a black gown with two appendages a *khimar* or head scarf covering the bosom and also a *niqab* which covers the whole face leaving a slit for the eyes. Sometimes even this narrow slit is covered by a thin black piece of cloth (part of the same *niqab*) so as to cover the eyes too. The *niqab* is worn as a compulsory part of the dress and is believed to be a Quranic injunction drawn from the interpretation of the phrase "to draw their veils over their bosom" as "to pull their veils down through the bosom."[6]

Also what is important and is included in the code of dressing is the non-display of ornaments. The exhibition of body adornments and use of tinkling jewelry that makes sound and may attract the other person is strictly forbidden. The inclusion of ornaments and adornments in the study of dress and clothing is not new in the academia, as Arthur argues that dress cannot be narrowed down to cloth, stitched or draped, it means much more than that, including both "body supplements, such as clothing and accessories and behaviours, such as dieting, plastic surgery and cosmetics, leading to changes in body shape." (Arthur 2000: 2). In the *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion* (Steele (ed.) 2005: 94) the term dress is defined in terms of "clothing, grooming, and all forms of body adornments." Likewise, *purdah* as dress requires hiding not

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[5] Translation by Yusuf Ali. http://www.islamicity.com/QuranSearch.

[6] There is a debate among religious scholars whether covering the face is a compulsory injunction or not. The Deobandi school of thought that this seminary belongs to regard it as compulsory.

only body forms but also the adornments and the wearer to follow a code of conduct defined as modest by religious discourse.

Two other aspects that are considered as essential criteria for this type of dress include, the black colour of the cloth and simplicity. The explanation of opting black colour is complex, it is not compulsory but preferable; preferable to the extent of compulsion. The gown has to be loose and dark in colour, the darker the colour the minimum the chances are of getting identified or revealing body forms. Simplicity of gown and its appendages is also an essential aspect, it should not be beautified with embroidery, threadwork, sequins, printed motives etc. the belief is that "the package has to be simple the more beautiful the package is the more it will attract others and make them curious about the inside product."[7]

The use of black gown with its appendages, the simplicity demanded in dress and the forbiddance of public display of ornaments, in the absence of any formal instructions about institutional uniform reveals it not only as a learned behaviour but as what is termed as "social fact" in the Durkheimian sense. This social fact is explained as *burqa* not being a new introduction but one that always existed in the society and started vanishing only after the western influence increased. Also important is the categorization[8] of various forms of dress with the given social fact. Thus, all the forms of dresses may be categorized under four broad headings by the women at the seminary; preferable, acceptable, partially acceptable and absolutely rejected. Preferable may be defined as a dress that is replication of the one worn by these women; under the category acceptable, fall all those dresses that fulfill all the necessary criteria of *purdah*, including loose outer garment, covering of the head and face but does not necessarily use black cloth for that or the same style of gown and headscarf or the face covering, in short it may vary in style and colour. Partially acceptable includes wearing of *shalwar kameez*[9] with a long, wide *dupatta* covering the head, in rather pastel and not so bright colours. And absolutely rejected includes all those form of dresses that bear any resemblance to western dress or that are perceived as glamorous and modern by the society at large and that which reveals the body contours. It is important to note here that a change in the context may elevate the partially acceptable dress to the acceptable or rather preferable, as one of the respondents narrates:

> "After high school, my mother went to stay in England. There she saw Pakistani girls wearing skirts, she explained them that this type of dress does not fulfill the requirement of our religion. Her lectures were very effective; they encouraged retaining one's identity in a foreign land and the girls then started wearing *shalwar kameez*. The purpose of dress is to cover, I don't think there is any western dress that fulfills this criterion, either they are too short or too tight."

It did not take me long to realize to which category my own dress fell within their ontological framework; it was partially acceptable. Neither I covered my face nor did I wear an outer garment to hide my dress. This type of dress was deliberately chosen, keeping in view the image management and image perception rule, as to be one not too modern to offend them neither too

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[7] A comment often presented as a logic invoking simplicity.

[8] This categorization was not clearly stated but has been deducted by the researcher on the basis of their opinion about women's popular dressing, western dress and specially the attitude towards the researcher's own dress.

[9] National dress of Pakistan, a long shirt worn with baggie pants and a long broad piece of cloth that may or may not be used to cover the head.

conservative so as to leave no room for learning. This management proved to be successful, the signals transmitted as aimed; the dress was taken as a sign of ignorance whereby I was required to be taught about *purdah*.

So far only the material aspects of *purdah* as dress have been discussed. Following is the conceptual comprehension of this particular dress code. As is evident from the categorization of dresses, there exists a distinct type of *purdah* constructed in the worldview of the women at the seminary which they distinguish from all those who dress differently. The categorization of dress leads to grouping of various forms of *purdah* into two broad types: *purdah urfi* and *purdah shara'i*. The former is practiced by the society at large and lays more stress on maintaining a social distance between the two genders. It requires the following of such code of etiquettes that allows limited interaction between the two genders with primary function of dress considered as covering of the whole body with no specifications about the cut and style. "*Purdah* of the heart" as it is generally called. This type of *purdah* is not considered as authentic. A senior student at the *madrasah* argues "people say that it is actually *purdah* of the heart that is necessary which is not true. There is no such thing as *purdah* of the heart. *Purdah* has to be of something which is not hidden, of something that needs to be covered and not of something that is already covered, like the heart. We believe, proper dress code is the most important requirement of *purdah*. The primary *purdah* is also that of the eyes, one should not stare at others." As against *purdah urfi*, *purdah shara'i* literally refers to one defined by the Islamic legal system and practiced in the Islamic schools, the proprietors of Islamic knowledge. Since *purdah* is believed to have originated as a religious obligation it has to be followed as is conceptualized and practiced by the religious scholars.

On the other hand the society's conception about modesty among women and her dress can be best understood by reading Bano Qudsia's, an eminent writer of the region, analysis on the subject: "it is all a matter of degree, *burqa* clad women consider unveiled women with long braids liberal-minded.[10] The ones with long braids consider women with short hair immodest. But the latter thinks she only has a hair cut, the true immodest women are those who put mascara and eye shadow during the day, who in turn believe that she is still pious compared to those who do not wear *dupatta*,[11] wear see-through clothes and smoke cigarette in public. And for this smoker the real vamp is the one who sits with men and watches blue movies ... and it goes on" (Qudsia 2002: 35, 36).[12] The text elucidates that more concealed the body parts are and lesser the use of ornamentation and beautification products is, the more modest a women is considered.

The centrality of modesty in clothing is evident from the fact, registered by Gilman, that it is one of the five motivational forces behind clothing and its variations among cultures and social groups. The other four being: "protection[13], warmth, decoration and symbolism". She continues to argue that these five motivational forces may overlap each other (Gilman 2002 (1915): 7). In

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[10] It is important to note that the tone in which liberal-mindedness is used is to emphasize the concept as a negative virtue in the society.

[11] A long piece of cloth, part of the three piece dress considered both as national and traditional dress in Paksitan. The cloth either hangs loosely over the shoulders or can be worn in a way to cover the head as well.

[12] The original text is in Urdu which has been translated into English by the author.

[13] When Gilman refers to protection as one of the motivational forces behind clothing she does so with reference to environment and climate. However, for the respondents here, the protection is in symbolic sense.

her essay "A protest against Petticoats" (cit. in Wrisley 2006: 10) she includes "comfort" as an essential feature of clothing too. As we will notice later in the article that modesty as well as protection and comfort are the causative forces behind creation of the type of *purdah* practiced in *madrasah*.

Purdah shar'ai expressed in the form of *burqa* worn by the women in seminary help creates a distinct identity through their apparent dress: an idenity claiming religiosity that demands modesty. If modesty is taken as synonymous to *haya* then the centrality of this concept in Islamic tradition is evident from its repeated mentioning in *Hadith*-s as a significant aspect of faith. The oft-quoted *hadith*-s with reference to *haya* by the respondents include two from Sahi Bukhari.[14] One that "*haya* (modesty/ shame) is part of *iman* (faith)" and the second can be interpreted[15] as "if you do not have *haya* you can do what you want". While religious moral commitment requires *haya*/ modesty in dress of both men and women (Daly 2000: 137), however, my interlocutors considered modesty (*sharam*/ *haya*) "the real asset of a woman; they protect it and it will protect them."

The question arises how does hiding one's body protects her and against what. The simplest answer would be that it protects her from men's gaze and from being harassed. It is believed that women if not properly covered are vulnerable to the aggression of male sexuality which cannot be controlled. A respondent refers to once having heard on radio 'a survey being conducted in which men were being the reasons for increased occurrence of women's harassment, most commonly done either by following them or by calling names. Majority replied because they adorn themselves so, if they are simply dressed and veiled why would we do so'. The narration of the incident was to bring to light the much prevalent harassment best countered by *purdah*. Papanek in her extensive study on *purdah* in Pakistan notes the same vulnerability of women and *purdah* as providing "symbolic shelter" against "sex and aggression which are clearly recognized as being part of the human condition but difficult for the individual to control" (Papanek 1971: 518–19).

Also for these women, *purdah* renders them with respectability and leaves an "impression on men" that reflects the strength of their moral character. The chastity and modesty of their character are symbolically and visually communicated through the observance of proper dress code. *Purdah* then as a "gendered dress"[16] helps rid women of their gender and convenes their mobility in the men's world. In her study on *purdah* in South Asia, Sitara Khan notes that

> "Quintessentially purdah is the covering of women's bodies to make them asexual. This means the more covered-up a woman is, the more 'respectable', and this varies from one culture to another and from one context to another in the same culture. To be taken seriously and for their opinions to carry the same weight as men's, their bodies must be concealed" (Khan 1999: 39).

While the overall covering feature of this type of dress gives protection, its simplicity is believed to symbolize renunciation of material life. According to them the outside world is too materialistic,

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[14] One of the four authentic books that state the sayings and actions of the prophet.

[15] Realizing the vastness and richness of the Arabic language, the women at the *madrasah* never used the expression "the prophet said" rather they use the "hadith can be interpreted as" because the same sentence may be interpreted in diverse ways. However, it is also important to note any interpretation of Ahadiths or Quranic verses that does not corresponds to the interpretation by the school of thought they belong to is not held as authentic.

[16] A term used by Barnes and Eicher 1992: 20ff.

making people not only self-centered but also selfish. To sum up, the main reason for observing *purdah* is to avoid *fitna* (tribulations). In case of non-observance the primary fitna-s would be premarital or extramarital sexual relationships, the breaking of the family structure, and the revealing dress of women and consequent objectification of women's body. A very interesting connection is drawn between these tribulations as a consequence of modernity. Secularism, modernity, and materialism are all treated as complementary concepts, leading to an ultimate collapse of society's morality, hence, any factor promoting these concepts is avoided to the level of considering it *haram* (forbidden by religion), media being one such example.

3. Conclusion

A few days before I was to leave the *madrasah* during an informal converstation with a group of girls, the narratives of their experience of doning *burqa* further helped understanding what their dress means to them. I will here quote a descriptive commentary of a 24 year old *mu'alima* whose *burqa* made her life easier, simpler and protected.

"I was very modern[17] before I joined the *madrasah*. My neighbour's cousin used to study here, she wore gown, I liked it and started wearing it just for experience's sake. My family used to make fun of me, they could never imagine I could change. I was very emotional then, not only did I start wearing the gown I also decided to join the *madrasah*. My family did not approve, however, respecting my interest they let me. I liked the life here, I was eager to learn, and eager to practise what I learnt. Before I only knew about religion here I realized it, I felt it. People think that religion makes you leave the world, it does not, it just makes one live for religion. They get surprised when I accept their invitation to celebrations and festivals, they don't understand that my *burqa* does not forbid me to participate in life. I like my *burqa*, it has made my life simpler and easier. Unlike other girls, neither am I occupied with trivial questions of what to wear or how to look attractive nor do I feel deprived that "I don't have enough."

I have learnt through my personal experience that not only it protects me it helps protect others too. My cousins' friends ask him why does he lowers his gaze and acts respectful towards *burqa* clad women and not otherwise and he says he fears lest his *baji*[18] is among them."

This paper elucidates the functional and symbolic aspects of *purdah* and using an "emic" approach is an attempt to better understand a rather misunderstood subject. Through the description of *purdah* as is practiced in the *madrasah* as a multi-functional and multi-symbolic gender dress, it establishes grounds against "fairly universal" "western reaction" to it as an "inherently oppressive practice" resembling "domestic violence" (Hirschman 1997: 467). The research validates theories that consider it as a strategy to exercise power within a given context, as an identity marker and last but not the least as representation of modesty, privacy, resistance and social control that upholds sexual morality (El Guindi 1999; Hirshman 1997; Papanek 1971).

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[17] As explained earlier, modernity as a concept carries negative connotation.
[18] A term of respect used specifically for older sister or older women.

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