

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Unveiling Literary Representations of The Veil

Veiling is not the dominant theme in Rushdie's works; however, according to Daphne Grace, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *The Satanic Verses* reveal "how the veil is used as a self-conscious literary device and a means of social and political comment" (7). For instance, Rushdie opens up *Midnight's Children* with a chapter entitled "the perforated sheet" that alludes to the failure of veiling in keeping the female character, Naseem, modest and chaste—an identity that veiling is supposed to unveil. In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie also dedicates a chapter about veiling under the title of "The Curtain," a brothel that simultaneously mirrors and contradicts all the practices of the housewives of the Prophet. Similarly, in *Shame* Rushdie names one of the chapters "The Woman in the Veil." The important message from the three novels is that veiling or unveiling should be a free choice for women. In contrast, in some Muslim countries where veiling or unveiling is enforced by laws, veiling is no longer a personal decision; it is always loaded with political interests. As Marnia Lazreg remarks, "The politicization of the veil—its forced removal or its legal enforcement (as in Iran and Saudi Arabia)—hampers women's capacity to make a decision freely, just as it also compels them to

abide by an intrusive law at the expense of their own conscience and judgment” (8).

While it is true that veiling and unveiling can be a means of resistance and provide agency for women, most of the female characters in the novels are not totally free in deciding what they actually want. They are caught in the rigid option of whether to veil or unveil; their veiling and unveiling are given, not decided.

Veiling and unveiling in the three novels are less about personal preferences and more about political manipulation that will eventually benefit the patriarchal institutions. Gayatri Spivak eloquently describes this situation of “third-world women”: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (102). Spivak’s argument highlights the suffering of women, how they are robbed of their freedom and are left with choices that are highly constraining. Under traditional patriarchy, women are absolutely the oppressed ones, but imperialism that promises modernization, which will bring women into enlightenment, free from the claws of traditional patriarchy, still positions women at a disadvantage. This civilizing mission of the imperialists basically held the colonial principle in which “the Muslim woman was to be exploited by the Western Man but protected from enslavement by the Muslim man; she was to be liberated from her ignorance and her culture’s cruelty” (Moghissi 16). It is in this context that veiling is seen as the sign of Muslim women’s backwardness, and is made a justification for the imperialists to “free” them from their savage, patriarchal men.

Nonetheless, veiling and unveiling in the novels are a matter of religious, political, economic, and social survival of these female characters in the society where

they live in and a matter of voicing women's desires and resistance against the patriarchal domination, even though they are not totally free from the male political bias. As Nancy J. Hirschmann asserts, "If survival is the basis of feminist theory, I would argue that finding ways for women to see survival as a viable form of resistance against this normative oppression should be feminism's primary goal both in theory and practice" (35). Thus, even though veiling and unveiling in the novels are problematic forms of resistance and agency, they are women's ways of survival.

### **Veiling Defined**

In this study of veiling in three of Rushdie's novels, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *Satanic Verses*, "veil" is defined in four ways: a head covering that covers the hair and the neck but not the face, simply called "veil" in the novels; a head-to-toe covering that hides all parts of the body and leaves the eyes only revealed, mentioned in the novels by the word "burqa"; a curtain that segregates men from women that is called "hijab" in *The Satanic Verses* and is called simply "curtain" or "purdah" elsewhere; and the seclusion for women in a special place called "zenana." Rushdie's antipathy with burqas and other forms of veiling that are highly restrictive are apparent in the novels under study.

Rarely does Rushdie portray the more moderate and common form of "hijab," which is a headscarf or head cover. In all the three novels, only Naseem and Doctor Aziz's mother in *Midnight's Children* wear head covers, while the rest are either covered in burqas or secluded in a zenana. Furthermore, his statement that the veil "sucks" refers to a full face covering or burqa. These instances may indicate that Rushdie is not against the form of veil as moderate as head cover or headscarves, even though they also do not

prove Rushdie's support of veiling in the form of head covering. Nonetheless, the emphasis Rushdie gives on the portrayal of burqas, segregation, and seclusion proves that he is strongly against these forms of veiling that he believes, as he reveals in his interview, "[are] a way of taking power away from women" (AM). While it is true that Rushdie portrays the veil as "a way of taking power away from women," through the various forms of veiling he explores, Rushdie also reveals the various strategic uses of veiling as a means of resistance against patriarchy.

### **Scholarship on Veiling in General and in Rushdie's Novels**

Despite its consistent appearance, limited scholarship exists addressing Rushdie's veiling in his texts. In her ethnographic study, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance*, Fadwa El Guindi argues that many scholars avoid the study of veiling due to its ideological meaning and "its association with Orientalist imagery" (xi). Her argument may well explain the same tendency to avoid studying veiling in Rushdie's works.

Fortunately, a few scholars have treated the topic of veiling in Rushdie's texts. These critics express divergent opinions about veiling: one belief is that veiling is inherently oppressive, but another belief is that the patriarchal system that renders veiling is oppressive, not the veil itself. Likewise, one belief is that the veiling need not be equated with oppression at all but rather with religious freedom and devotion, but another belief is that veiling as religious devotion is still patriarchal given that it has no actual support in the Quran.

Daphne Grace has pioneered the study of veiling in Rushdie texts, which she includes in her broad study of veiling in literary works across geographical boundaries. Grace decided to include Rushdie's works because "dominant themes in Rushdie's

novels are identity, migrancy, and exile—topics relevant to a consideration of how women are positioned in society. Moreover, several of his novels are rich in allusions to veiling and the trope of women beneath the veil” (7). Grace’s study “argues that the veil is by no means ineluctably oppressive” (10) as proven by the cross-gender studies she conducted.

Even though Grace’s study is cursory, it opens up a new path in the study of veiling in Rushdie’s works. Grace’s study finds that “the veil for Rushdie signifies modesty (Bilquis’s ‘dupatta of modesty’ and ‘womanly honour’ in *Shame* (1989: 85)); erotic enticement (the ‘perforated sheet’ in *Midnight’s Children* (1995: 9-23)); and male sexual fantasy (the ‘Hijab’ brothel in *Satanic Verses*)” (186). Grace focuses on veiling from the perspective of women’s and gender studies, particularly on how female sexuality and veiling are interrelated. Interestingly, she includes Rushdie in her critique, noting that “at the core of [Rushdie’s] representations . . . is a tendency to [eroticize] the veil, possibly reinforcing masculinist hegemonies: the overriding fascination of woman’s unveiling before the male gaze—and within this unveiling lies the inherent threat of female sexuality” (186). While it is true that Rushdie frequently eroticizes veiling in the three novels, it should be noted that his eroticization is deliberate and self-conscious, functioning as a catalyst for his female characters who unveil and veil in order to achieve agency and resistance in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, even though concluding that the veil “frequently represents a site of women’s oppression,” Grace admits that “both veiling and unveiling can be liberating or suppressive, depending on the context and on where and how women see themselves dominated” (7). As Rushdie shows, veiling is oppressive when it is forced on them by the patriarchal figures around them, ultimately

by their fathers and husbands. However, veiling can also be liberating when they take it as a way of resisting and fighting against the patriarchal values exerted upon them. In *Midnight's Children*, for instance, Naseem's voice drowns under the veil that is imposed upon by her father, Ghani. However, when she is forced to abandon the practice of purdah by her western-educated husband, Doctor Aziz, Naseem raises her voice to resist the coercion that she views as a colonial invasion towards her body and her religious beliefs.

The multiple interpretations of veiling and how veiling relates to women's agency are also explored by Leila Ahmed in her study of *Women and Gender in Islam*. Ahmed argues that as the issue of women and their relation to the current socio-political conditions of colonized countries came under scrutiny:

It was at this point that the veil emerged as a potent signifier, connoting not merely the social meaning of gender but also matters of far broader political and cultural import. It has ever since retained the cargo of signification. The fusion of the issue of women with issues of class, culture, and politics and the encoding of the issue of women and the veil with these further issues have been critical for women. (129)

Thus, as postcolonial works, Rushdie's novels become significant in the study of veiling not only because they portray the practice of veiling among women, but also because they portray the phenomenon during colonization and its aftermath, where veiling and women have been made a site of contestation for meanings, resistance, and agency.

One of the most recent scholars to include Rushdie's work in her study on veiling and to give more emphasis on the issue of veiling and agency is Colleen Ann Lutz



Clemens with her 2010 dissertation entitled "*Prisoner of My Own Stories*": *Women and the Politics of Veiling in Postcolonial Literature*. Taking the issue of veiling in Rushdie's work, *Shame*, a step further than Grace, Clemens also differs in her view of veiling and its most agreed upon function as a symbol of patriarchal oppression. While Grace finds in her study that veiling is "by no means ineluctably oppressive" (2), Clemens argues that "the veil is a manifestation of [women's] oppression, but these veils are not the source of the oppression: a patriarchal political structure is the culprit" (14). Clemens's argument differs greatly from most hegemonic western feminists who see it otherwise.

Nancy J. Hirschmann acknowledges the tendency of western feminists to see the veil as inherently oppressive, but she argues that such a tendency "belies a great diversity in the practice . . . and ignores the fact that many Muslim women not only participate voluntarily in it, but defend it as well, indeed claiming it as a mark of agency, cultural membership, and resistance" (171). Moreover, Hirschmann warns against the essentialist view of freedom. Western feminists should not believe that they share the same idea of freedom as the Muslim women. Just as some women find freedom and agency in the miniskirt or scanty dresses, Muslim women find that a fully covering garment gives them freedom and agency. Thus, the different views and beliefs on freedom will result in different choice of a means of agency:

The relevance of agency and freedom once again invites the image of choice, for many women themselves see veiling as a sign of devotion to Islam. Others see it as a symbol of cultural and political identity, rather than religious faith, but no less important. And indeed, it is precisely the women who choose veiling, defend it, and consider it vital to their self-

identity who pose the greatest challenge to Western understandings of agency. (Hirschmann 184)

The fact that Muslim women choose to veil is conflicting for “Western understandings of agency” because of the prevailing belief that the veil is oppressive and imposed upon Muslim women by the patriarchs. Nevertheless, the majority of Muslim women believe that veiling is an obligation that has nothing to do with patriarchy. Veiling for these women is an expression of piety and modesty.

Whereas some believe that veiling is an obligation as is revealed by the commands in the Quran, some believe that due to the contextual nature of the revelations, the obligation was only applicable for the Prophet’s wives. Scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed, for instance, argue that the command of veiling is nowhere to be found in the Quran. Ahmed, in particular, explains the historical background of veiling, either referring to head covering or physical segregation, as not originating from Islam; rather, its origin can be traced back to the early Mediterranean and Mesopotamian civilizations:

Veiling was not introduced into Arabia by Muhammad but already existed among some classes, particularly in the towns, though it was probably more prevalent in the countries that the Arabs had contact with, such as Syria and Palestine . . . It is nowhere explicitly prescribed in the Quran; the only verses dealing with women’s clothing, aside from those already quoted, instruct women to guard their private parts and throw a scarf over their bosoms (Sura 24:31-2). Throughout Muhammad’s lifetime veiling, like seclusion, was observed only by his wives. (55)



Even the two intrinsically diverging views explained here have branched out into diverse views on veiling. Many who believe that veiling is an obligation differ in the way they practice it, ranging from simply wearing headscarves to secluding themselves from any interaction from non-muhrim or ineligible men—men who are not blood-related and are eligible to marry. Even veiling in the form of headscarves also varies in terms of preferences for the types of fabric, color, and length of the scarves. A certain group of veiled women wearing headscarves, for instance, will argue that the more they cover and the thicker the garments they wear, the more pious they are. As for those who do not believe veiling to be an obligation for all Muslim women, they also vary in their reasons. Ahmed's contention, thus, only represents one of the existing arguments. These dividing views in veiling inside and outside of Muslim society reflect how complex and varied the practices of veiling and the beliefs underlying those practices are.

Rushdie himself, in an interview with Stephanie Kennedy from *AM*, declared his opinion against veiling; specifically, he spoke out against the head-to-toe covering that is famous by the name burqa, although some cultures may call it differently. His statement was a defense for the former Foreign Minister and leader of the House of the Commons, Jack Straw, who suggested that “wearing full-face veils could harm community relations,” and “urged Muslim women to discard their veils” (*AM*). In defense of Straw's controversial statement, Rushdie declares, “He was expressing an important opinion, which is that veils suck, which they do.” He backs up his opinion by reflecting on the real experiences of his own Muslim sisters:

But I'm speaking as somebody with three sisters in a very largely female Muslim family. There's not a single woman I know in my family or in

their friends who would've accepted the wearing of the veil. And I think, you know, the battle against the veil has been a long and continuing battle against the limitation of women. (AM)

Rushdie's view of veiling is well reflected in the three novels under discussion. He portrays how the patriarchal manipulation of veiling limits women's agency. However, he also depicts how these women negotiate their veiling in order to subvert its patriarchal manipulation.

### **Veiling in Rushdie's Novels**

Interestingly, in his novels, Rushdie acknowledges the diversity of perspectives offered by the critics cited here, ultimately of how veiling is oppressive when it is imposed upon Muslim women by their patriarchs, and how veiling is liberating when it is used as a strategic means of resisting the patriarchal oppression. For example, in *Midnight's Children*, Doctor Aziz's mother has to unveil in order to survive the financial difficulties that she faces after her husband's illness fails him as a breadwinner. In the same fashion, Naseem has to unveil or come out of purdah if she wants to survive in her marriage. On the other hand, Jamila has to veil if she wants to pursue a career in singing. When she is faced with the death threat of war, she has to veil herself in a church. In *Shame*, Sufiya Zinubia has to veil in order to survive the inflicted shame that has rendered her monstrous, while in *The Satanic Verses*, Mishal agrees with her husband's decision to seclude her because she wants to keep her marriage intact.

Hirschmann attests to this kind of patriarchal oppression that uses veiling as its main tool: "veiling itself is not oppressive, but rather . . . its deployment as a cultural symbol and practice may provide (and often has done so) a form and mode by which

patriarchy oppresses women in specific contexts” (171). Resonating with Clemens’ idea, Hirschmann’s argument also casts patriarchy as the “real culprit” of women’s oppression with veiling as the tool.

On the other hand, Rushdie shows how the female characters claim their own veiling and resist the patriarchal oppression. Naseem, a female character from *Midnight’s Children* defends her veiling against the persistent request of her husband to abandon it because she wants to choose her own means of agency. In the end, she gives up her purdah or physical seclusion, but maintains her head covering. Leaving the practice of purdah behind, Naseem continues veiling her body and her household against any Western cultural invasion. She resists any Western beliefs and practices that her husband, Doctor Aziz, imposes upon her. In *Shame*, Bilquis finally adopts a complete silence and physical covering of burqa as way of expressing her free choice and voicing her resistance against her patriarchal husband. Both female characters find their voice or agency by employing the very tool the patriarchs use to oppress them, and reclaim veiling as their own choice. Even though for non-Muslim women of privilege, veiling may seem to be conceding to a patriarchal institution, these female characters are able to find their voice and resist the patriarchal oppression.

Meanwhile, Rushdie’s harsh critique towards the head-to-toe covering or burqa is demonstrated clearly by how he depicts this kind of veiling in his novels. In the works under study, burqas are often represented as a means of covering, of hiding identity. Sufiya Zinubia Shakil from *Shame*, for instance, breaks her accumulated shame and anger towards the patriarchal figures in her family by turning to violence: she kills men as revenge for the men who have inflicted shame and anger in her, and she does so by

manipulating burqa as her disguise. Nonetheless, this negative representation of burqa still unveils its strategic use as a means of resistance for Sufiya. Ironically, the covering can also be beneficial for men, such as proven by the intelligent disguise of Omar Khayyam Shakil and Raza Hyder in *Shame*, who can escape from their assassinations by wearing burqas.

These female characters' survivals in various aspects of their lives that are controlled and dominated by patriarchy revolve around veiling and unveiling. The act of veiling and unveiling shows that a woman's body is a site of a constant negotiation of power. The female characters constantly struggle to find their own voices to resist patriarchy. Even if the voices come from the male perspective of the author, Rushdie, they are still women's voices that call attention to women's sufferings in a male-dominated society.

### **Thesis Overview**

This study reveals how the female characters in the three of Rushdie's novels, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *The Satanic Verses*, negotiate their veiling and unveiling in a tightly patriarchal society. I will divide my discussion into two chapters, with chapter two focuses on how the patriarchy manipulates the religious functions of veiling in order to suppress and dominate women for their own benefits, and chapter three discusses the strategic uses of both veiling and unveiling in resisting those patriarchal manipulations using Third Space Feminism as the framework. Throughout the discussion, the veiling and unveiling of the female characters will be analyzed from the religious, political, social, and economic aspects. As Grace remarks, "political, social, religious and gender factors all play a part in determining the reasons for and symbolism

of veiling. Structuring concepts of both religious ‘identity’ as well as indicating new social hierarchies, the veil remains a primary site of national and political negotiation” (13). Exploring Rushdie’s novels will help illuminate how Rushdie’s female characters claim and employ veiling in order to survive within a patriarchal society.

