THROUGH THE WOMEN'S BODY: STAGING REBELLION IN THE PLAY *PURDAH* BY ISMAIL

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Abstract: This article examines the play Purdah (1993) by the playwright Ismail Mahomed, a Pakistani writer and director born in Johannesburg (29 May 1959) who has been active on the theatre scene in South Africa for the last thirty years. Purdah[1] is a one-woman stage performance that addresses the issue of seclusion and subjugation of the Muslim Indian women of Lenasia, the neighbourhood of Johannesburg, which during the apartheid regime was constructed as a ghetto for the Indian community. I argue that the play, narrating the story of Ayesha, a young girl subjected to the customary practices of her community and Muslim family laws, is an instance of 'issue theatre' that creates a venue for discussing the seclusion of women in purdah not just as a curtailing of freedom and a breach of human rights, but also   as a psychological form of 'colonisation of the mind' that impinges on the development of woman's psyche and impedes the act of 'creation', in the double meaning of artistic 'creativity' (poiesis) and 'fabrication' of subjectivity.

Keywords: Muslim Indian women, post apartheid, women's body, theatre, Muslim family law, South asian community, Imtiaz Dharker, customary laws, religious laws

Introduction

They have all been sold and bought,

The girls I knew,
Unwilling virgins who had been taught
Especially in this strangers' land, to bind
Their brightness tightly round

Whatever they might wear
In the purdah of the mind
(Dharker, 1997, 18)[2]

This article examines the play *Purdah* (1993) by the playwright Ismail Mahomed, a Pakistani writer and director born in Johannesburg (29 May 1959) and who has been active on the theatre scene in South Africa for the last thirty years.[3]

Purdah narrates the story of Ayesha, a young Muslim Indian girl who is forcefully married to Ahmed, a man ten years her senior, whom she meets only once during one of the Sunday gatherings of relatives and friends arranged by her obnoxious aunt to showcase her as a prospective bride. After refusing a few potential husbands, her father decides – with the active collaboration of her horribly despotic aunt – to marry her off to Ahmed. The marriage takes place as convened, and Ayesha is made to tie the knot with an unknown man through the most conventional of the customary laws: the shedding of her blood during the first night of the wedding. Once this 'covenant of blood' has been 'cut' through her body, the marriage is considered consumated and valid under the Muslim family laws that sanctions such rites. However, despite trying her best to fit into her role of a dutiful wife and an obedient daughter-in-law, Ayesha finds herself at odds with her life as a newly wedded bride. Incapable of putting up with her mother-in-law's abuses and her husband's physical assaults, Ayesha firstly decides to abort her baby, then tries to kill herself, and finally – after betraying Ahmed with his best friend Ridwaan and upon hearing that her husband is going to take a second wife– murders Ahmed during sexual intercourse. Taken away by the police, she has to face trial for murdering her husband. Her lawyer is her lover Ridwaan, who has asked her to plead guilty. The play sets out from this point, when Ayesha is waiting to be taken to court.

Purdah is a one- woman stage performance that addresses the issue of seclusion and subjugation of the Muslim Indian women of Lenasia, the neighbourhood of Johannesburg which, during the apartheid regime, was constructed as a ghetto for the Indian community.[4] Devised around a single character who, through the use of stage props, re-enacts her life-story (whilst simultaneously enacting all the other characters of the play), *Purdah* belongs to the genre of what Ismail Mahomed has called 'issue theatre,' a theatre that 'deals with social topics such as racism, gender equality, and sexuality, and favours short, one-actor plays because they can be most efficiently produced and toured to a variety of venues' (Graver, 1999, 154).

Despite the many socio-political changes that have occurred in the South Asian community of Lenasia, and notwithstanding the fact that twenty years have elapsed from the writing of *Purdah*, the play still occupies a crucial space in the theatrical scenario of post-apartheid South Africa, as it opens a space for discussing the seclusion of women in *purdah* not just as a curtailing of freedom and a breach of human rights, but also as a psychological form of 'colonisation of the mind' that impinges on the development of woman's psyche and impedes the act of 'creation', in the double sense of artistic 'creativity' (*poiesis)* and 'fabrication' of subjectivity.5 Both these acts of 'creation' can be accomplished through words, through the semiotic- symbolic system of language. The purdah of the mind can be defeated through *poiesis*– real 'creation', an *act* that, as Plato states in the *Symposium*, serves to 'bring something into existence that was not there before' (Plato, 1971, 43). This may be equated to the 'fabrication of subjectivity', which is made into an 'I' only by virtue of language. Thus, it is through the symbolic field of language, via the *poietic* creations of literature, drama, and poetry, that the purdah of the mind, of which the secluded space of the house is a mere reflection, can be dismantled.

Entering the debate on the 'fabrication of subjectivity' and the issue of the 'subject,' Julia Kristeva (1984, 215) affirms: 'The subject never is. The subject is only the signifying process and he appears only as a signifying practice [. . .].'6 Distancing herself from the materialist tradition that looks for explanations regarding women's subordination and 'lack of subjectivity' in the patriarchal social institutions and material and economic conditions, Kristeva instead investigates those 'psychic structures and patriarchal colonisation of the imaginary and the culture' (Oliver, 2000, vii) where, through the analysis of language and what she calls the 'socio-symbolic system', she arrives at the conclusion that woman cannot 'be defined' ('La femme, ce n'est jamais ça').[7]

Kristeva's psycholinguistic feminism capitalises on Saussure's notion of language as a system of signification and is heavily indebted to Lacan's theories of the 'symbolic'. In this semiotic and symbolic field of analysis, 'man' and 'woman' are simple signifiers that do not refer to any pre-existing reality: quite the opposite, it is *through language* that the concepts of 'man' and 'woman' are produced, as a reflection of the symbolic order dominated by the Law of the Father. As such, Kristeva affirms, it is only from *within* the socio-symbolic order that struggle against fixed notions can be carried out, not creating another parallel socio-symbolic system that, ultimately, would be just a reversal of the phallocratic one, weakened by those same faulty premises. She has thus put forward a program of 'demassification of the problematic of difference' (1981, 51-52) where she has

refused to adopt an *écriture feminine* as essentialist and ultimately not conducive to radical change.[8]

The problems highlighted by Kristeva are quite central to feminist writers and playwrights who use literature and theatre to debunk stereotypical and fixed notions of 'man' and 'woman'. It becomes a matter of the utmost importance for challenging the phallocentric literary and performative constructions of a permanent and unitary subject to stir 'a revolution of the Symbolic and a consequent re- invention of the way of thinking, speaking, and writing' (Duchen, 1987 in Cetorelli, 2010, 24-5). Moreover, the feminist artist engaged in this struggle should be aware of the pitfalls highlighted by Kristeva, such as the tendency to further essentialise concepts like 'woman', 'man','feminine', and 'masculine', or, perhaps even worse, of the risk of romanticising the newly fabricated 'woman subject'.

Ismail Mahomed, as a playwright fully committed to the dismantling of the phallocratic symbolic system represented in phallocentric linguistic and dramatic performances, delivers a theatre of great physicality, where performativity and narrativity are carefully constructed in order to give body to the historical and psychological conditions that support these types of androcentric systems of power, often sustained by allegedly religious discourses deemed as 'sacrosanct' and, thus, unquestionable. *Purdah* - as a semiotic and symbolic dramatic stage - is devised as a perfect performance of multiple subjectivities that struggle to find wholeness and *jouissance*. In this sense, the play is nothing short of a revolutionary work in a battle over meaning, over signifiers and signified, over binary constructions such as Man/ Woman or Self/Other.

At a first reading, the play presents a realist reconstruction of diachronic facts and analyses the plight of Ayesha and her dramatic journey from 'victim' to 'murderer' in a determined socio-historical realm, that of Lenasia community. The play functions at its best when it engages an audience that either shares the plight of the character or is, at least, *aware* of these abject situations, raising a debate and encouraging the search for viable solutions at a practical and legal level. Much in the way Boal's Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre would do,9 Mahomed uses the relatively 'safe' space of theatrical performance to tackle stories of oppression, alienation, disenfranchisement and violence in order to create dialogue and find ways out from situations that sometimes seem almost fatally determined and hence unchallengeable.

Hence, Ayesha is a character *representative* of the invisible women of Lenasia, often forced into subordination, divested of their rights by the patriarchal social institutions in place.

The actress enacts the story, but is also enacted by it, as every performance becomes a ritual process (Turner, 1979)10 where small transformations are made possible. Taking the act of performing as 'a paradigm of liminality' (Schechner, 1985, 123), the performer becomes an individual who acts 'in between identities' (ibid.), performing a role of 'between personae' in a liminal field 'where they are neither themselves nor their roles' (ibid.).

It is this symbolically charged space of the theatre stage that allows the drama to unfold and the audience to witness the events in a safe space of potentiality where challenges to the status quo, reversals of positionalities and, ultimately, revolutionary actions are made possible.

A Socio-Historical Reading of *Purdah*: Amina Begum And The Muslim Women of Lenasia[11]

Purdah is a kind of safety.
The body finds a place to hide.
The cloth fans out against the skin Much like the earth that falls
On coffins after they put the dead men in
(Dharker, 1997, 14).

Inspired by a true event, *Purdah* was written by Ismail Mahomed in 1993 and premiered on 14 February, that same year, at the Wits University Downstairs Theatre 'as part of student orientation at the request of the Islamic Student Association' (Graver, 1999, 155). From there, it toured many different theatrical venues in other major cities of South Africa, like Durban (Natal Playhouse), Grahamstown (Grahamstown Festival), and so on. What I found striking when first reading *Purdah* was the fact that such thought- provoking and subversive play was allowed to be performed also in the premises of the purdah itself, 'offered in matinee performances at private homes for groups of Muslim women'(ibid.). This is, I posit, even more remarkable since, in recent times, the 'Indian Muslim' community of Lenasia seems to be undergoing a process of radicalisation (Vahed, 2000, 43-51) that has increasingly brought to the front the risk of potential clashes between the advocates of a more flexible interpretation of the Islamic jurisprudence, and the defenders of a literal reading of the *Qur'ān* as codified by the *'ulemā* (scholars with expertise on religion and law as in Arabic). Notwithstanding the risks implicit in defying the laws and the injunctions held as 'holy' by these 'wise men', many intellectuals, writers and human rights campaigners have not refrained from speaking out. Addressing the question of

women's rights and Muslim family laws in South Africa, for example, Rashida Manjoo (2006) has argued that South Africa must face the challenge of accommodating diversity in the frame of a secular democracy without giving in to the rhetoric of 'untouchability' of religious tenets and texts. Discussing the sensitive issue of marriages contracted under religious laws (until recently not recognised as valid and not legalised by the South African state), Manjoo has repeatedly advocated the recognition of Islamic marriages under the supervision of the Law Reform Commission.[12] However, whilst urging the draft of a new *Muslim Marriage Bill*, she has simultaneously called for a consultation with the Commission on Gender Equality in order to implement the Constitutional principles of equality by providing legal recognition to all religious marriages. As she has often argued, the demand for the legal recognition of marriages conducted under Islamic Law is absolutely necessary. However, such recognition should not violate the fundamental rights and values that were established at the founding of South African democracy, including the right to gender equality (Manjoo, 2006).

Manjoo is deeply aware that too many violations of women's individual rights go under the cover of 'respecting tradition', 'following religious tenets', 'preserving culture' - statements that are often put forward to justify the most abject forms of abuse inflicted on women. It was under this biased conception of Islam as a system that predicates the total submission of the woman to the 'Law of the Father' that a 13- years old Muslim girl, Amina Begum, could be sold as a child- bride by her own parents to a 56- years old Saudi man. What the defenders of such 'customary laws' sanctioned by the 'wise men' of the Muslim community perhaps did not expect was that a group of young, educated Muslims would stand up and challenge such practices not just as unconstitutional, but even as un- Islamic. As the introduction to the play explains,

The inspiration for *Purdah* came first from the community workers who counsel battered women in Lenasia, and then from the story of Amina Begum, a 13-year old Indian sold by her parents as a child- bride to a 56- years old Saudi Arabian. The feminist themes of the play are linked to Mahomed's concerns over the Indian variety of Islamic fundamentalism that has become popular in some of South Africa's Muslim communities (Graver, 1999, 154).

Requesting the play to be staged publicly and privately, both domains in which forms of radical Islam may become more and more institutionalised, *Purdah* 'has elicited condemnations and threats' (ibid.). However, as Graver highlights, even among those 'conservative or fundamentalist Muslims' (ibid.) who, in a first moment, had attacked the play as offensive to Islam, there were many that - upon having seen it on stage - found its

arguments legitimate. Such may be the power of what Schechner (2003) has called 'rasic performance', a type of theatrical experience that is so emotionally charged to turn spectators into 'partakers' of the performed action, bringing them to 'respond sympathetically to the "as if" of the characters living out a narrative' (Schechner, 2003, 356). The spectators, in *rasic* theatre, 'empathize with the experience of the performers playing. This empathy with the performer, rather than with the plot, is what permits Indian theatre to "wander," to explore detours and hidden pathways, unexpected turns in the performance'(2003, 358).[13]

In shattering the threshold that separates the private sphere of the house from the public sphere dominated by men, the emotions are allowed to flow in and out of the stage, and theatre becomes a space of 'remarkable experience (ibid.), where even a spectator potentially unsympathetic with Ayesha's plight may arrive, at the end of the performance, to 'see' (*theatron*) and to 'unveil' her 'truth' *(aletheia)*. This is perhaps the reason why the play ends with a direct invocation to the audience where Ayesha does not reject Islam, but rather calls for a more nuanced and sensitive reading of the *Qur'ān*. Ismail Mahomed could have chosen to put Ayesha in radical confrontation with the symbolic system that had produced her dramatic life, but decided instead – much in line with what intellectuals like Rashida Manjoo have been advocating – to re-signify her identity of 'Muslim Indian Woman' inside the semiotic frame of the *ummah*, the 'community of believers'. She never abjures her religion nor shuns her faith in God, but declares herself 'a sinner', imputing her state of wretchedness to the patriarchal system and to the *misreading* of the Holy *Qur'ān* by the men of her community:

[*Pages through the Quran*] I am a sinner. I have sinned. I sinned when I aborted my baby. My relationship with Ridwaan may not be right. I am a sinner, but I believe in a God who looks upon me with eyes of mercy. My God doesn't shun sinners. *My God knows that I am a victim of other people's injustices*. In studying this book, I have discovered that in the eyes of our creator, women are no less equal than men. My God has given my dignity back to me and yet when I look at other women and I sense the pain in their hearts, *I pray that when their husbands read the same Quraan that I do*, *they would realise that our God frowns upon the way that they have brutalised their women* (Mahomed, 1993, in Graver, 1999, 164-5; Emphasis is added by me).

In addressing the spectators as a 'sinner' rather than as a 'woman', Ayesha reclaims not just a space in the community of the believers, but also an agency: she has discovered that she can break those rules, even at the cost of life, because the *aletheia* needs to be

'unveiled' in order to see her as a portrait of thousands of other Indian Muslim women made 'victim[s] of other people's injustices.'[14]

Staging Dissent: The Theatrical Space As a *Panopticon*

Purdah is a 'drama of liminality' (Balme, 1999, 77) where theatre becomes a site of powerful transformation: in such space, the character of Ayesha, the archetypical battered and oppressed woman, can access a 'betwixt-and-between' dimension (Turner, 1979, 465), where 'liminal time [. . .] is a time of enchantment when anything *might*, even should, happen' (ibid.). In this 'subjunctive mood' (ibid.) of liminality, her character can rebel, resist and, eventually, even reverse the course of events, using the theatrical body as a channel of energy to transform her-Self and the world around her.

One can also imagine the space of the theatrical stage as one of the small cages of Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* where, as Foucault has pointed out, the simple fact that the caged person is exposed to complete *visibility,* traps him/her unconditionally:
 By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognise immediately. [. . .] visibility is a trap (Foucault, 1995, 200).

If we pay attention to the way Ismail Mahomed has imagined the stage – in terms of pure 'visuality' (leaving out, for now, the props and the arrangement of the space), we realise that the spectators are, indeed, posited in a privileged space from where they enjoy complete visibility - much like the guards of a tower of a Benthamian Panopticon. The audience can gaze at Ayesha on stage 'as if' she were inside one of the 'small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible' (ibid.). She is like a 'shadow in a cell', as the *Scene I* described by Mahomed makes clear:
A pre- set position: In a dimly- lit stage, Ayesha is seen standing against the window and looking out. As the audience settles down and as the lighting intensifies, Ayesha turns to face and address the audience (Graver, 1995, 156; italics in the original).

Trapped as she is in the panoptic space of the stage, the actress is left with no other choice but to face the audience in a sort   of *parabasis* that, despite being uttered by a single person, echoes all the pathos of a collective drama. Ayesha narrates her personal story but

simultaneously, she is recounting the destiny of many other 'good Muslim Indian women' of Lenasia, whose fate is allegedly inscribed on their foreheads and, as such, must be accepted without questioning.

The audience acts the simultaneous roles of *spectator*, a simple observer of the caged individual caught on stage, and of *judge*, a more active persona that is aware of the system of control enacted and, thus, observes the 'captive subject' on stage *as if* he is sitting in a Court and have to pass a judgment on her behaviour according to the laws established by the power- holders of the panoptic system. In this theatrical Panopticon, we take the function of the theatre more literally, as a place of *theatron* – vision – where the spectators/judges gaze at Ayesha's life even in her most intimate moments, in a voyeuristic 'exercise of power' (Foucault, 1995, 206) that, by its very spatial design acts directly on individuals; it gives 'power of mind over mind' (ibid.).

As Jain and Amin (1995, 2) have argued, 'Purdah is the oldest form of colonisation, of domination and of control. [. . .] It defines space, action and relationships.' The positionality of Ayesha in such   a 'trap' of constant visibility subjects her to the ubiquitous (and yet almost invisible) rules of the patriarchal system of control, a phallocratic mode of governance that is indeed structured as a tool of tight control. If we stretch the symbolism of the Panopticon a little further, we can subscribe to Foucault's definition of it and apply it entirely to the system of seclusion and restriction of women's free will and free movement in many societies:

It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organisation, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition   of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons (Foucault, 1995, 205).

The list that Foucault provides can be enlarged to include also the domestic space of the house, in an interminable repetition of the binary *ghar/ bahir*, 'domestic/ public', as theorised by Partha Chatterjee (2010). Discussing the colonial history of India and the period of the reforms when the 'issue of women's education and emancipation was brought to the front of the ideological and political debate, Chatterjee argued that the reforms for Indian women, as conceived in the frame of nationalist discourses, arose from the opposition between *ghar* (home)

- the 'private' or domestic space, and *bahir* (outside), - the 'public' domain occupied by men, the 'world' at large. He concluded that   the portrait of the ideal, respectable,

'modern' middle- class woman (*bhadramahila*) was invented through a narrative where the *bhadramahila* should not exhibit traits found in lower-caste or peasant women, but should also avoid behaving like a European woman, a *memsahib*. This new orthodoxy, generated by an emerging nationalist movement and devised as instrumental to it, ended up subjecting women to a new patriarchy (Chatterjee, 2010), another androcentric system where the women were still subjected to the control and the rules of men.

This androcentric system has been analysed by many scholars also in migrant and diasporic settings: Abin Cakraborty, for example, in discussing the dynamics of 'home, religion and gender in the diasporic imaginary' and the way gender roles are *re- constructed* in diasporic settings, has argued:

The typical 'unhomeliness' of a migrant often leads to a privileging of tradition which not only fashions a route to one's roots but provides a sense of belongingness. However, for women, the refuge of tradition often comes as a dubious gift as their imposed roles as uncontaminated bearers of cultural heritage in a foreign land subjects them to a series of constraints that lead to unavoidable subjugation, humiliation and loss of self-identity (2013, 72).

Diasporic Plights: South africa's Indian Muslim Woman's Double *Ghetto*

What Cakraborty finds reflected in the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker, namely a will to break free from the 'purdah of the mind', is reflected also in the play by Ismail Mahomed, where Ayesha challenges the   so- called *tradition*, this 'dubious gift' that often translates into a life devoid of happiness and freedom. As Pakistani scholar Farida Shaheed (1995) has highlighted, though, such constraints are present not just in diasporic settings, but in almost all Muslim-majority countries, where the public sector, business, banking, the military, and so on, are areas mostly regulated according to laws exogenous to Islam, whilst the domestic sphere is rigidly and tightly regulated by Islamic sanctions:
In sharp contrast, the official laws governing personal and family matters are almost universally premised on Muslim jurisprudence and justified by reference to Islamic injunctions. Throughout much of the world, therefore, the Muslim identity of a community appears to hinge almost exclusively on the regulation of family and personal matters. (Shaheed, 1995, 81- 82).

Whether the Muslim community constitutes a majority or a minority, or is indigenous to a certain nation- state or diasporic, seems to be irrelevant: when it comes to the codes of

behaviour and the customary laws that regulate the lives of Muslim women in highly traditional and patriarchal societies, what resonates as a constant leitmotiv is the role and the space allocated to women in the society according to particular readings of the *Sharia*, as passed on from generation to generation, and even across borders and oceans. 'Woman as ornament, woman as prostitute', Ayesha Jalal (2000, 69) provocatively reminds us. According to her, this perception of Muslim women, during colonial times, was strictly codified by the work of Muslim thinkers and '*ulemā* who 'were [. . .] determined to strictly consign women to the sacred geography of the Muslim household' (Jalal, 2000, 70). Citing the impact of the work of Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863-1943) on the Muslim South Asian communities around the world, Jalal states:

The elaborate detail, with which Ashraf Ali Thanawi outlines the ideal Muslim woman in his classic *Bihishti Zevar,* or heavenly ornaments, is more than a male fantasy. yet it has remained an agenda for perfection, impossible for Muslim women to attain. Ornaments of their homes, not of the heavens, women in the *ashraf* conception were inhabitants of the *zenana.* On the rare occasions when they did go out of the confines of their four walls, they were expected to don the *burqa*—that portable statement of *purdah* or physical seclusion and the cultural marker of the status of whole families as well as individual men (ibid.).

Such concept of women as 'symbols of a distinctive Islamic cultural identity' (Jalal, 2000, 71) seems to have reached the Muslim migrants living in Johannesburg, Durban or Cape Town. By the time the racial apartheid laws were imposed on the non- White people, the diasporic Indian Muslim community had been living in South Africa for more than a century, as many Indian Muslims had arrived there in the late nineteenth century as indentured labourers. The rather squalid area of Lenasia was slowly and painstakingly transformed into a lively and quite unique neighbourhood of Johannesburg, where the Indians had reconstituted their communities, built houses, opened schools, created businesses and, in line with their spiritual and religious precepts, also erected mosques and Hindu temples. Along with the search for a comfortable lifestyle, there was the need for preserving culture, tradition and religion. Customary and religious laws had to be maintained and the burden of preserving the honour of the community, as usual, fell upon women, on which it downed an increasingly restrictive code of behaviour allegedly sanctioned by religious scriptures. Even today, this 'turning to the core', as scholar Goolam Vahed (2013) has recently pointed out, seems to be affecting the Indian Muslims of South Africa in an increasingly worrying trend:

Among Indian Muslims, many have begun "turning to the core:" Many more women have begun to veil their faces; there has been greater concern with observing religious regulations concerning food; the numbers of Muslims going annually to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage has increased dramatically; televisions sets have been rooted out from many Muslim homes; there is a de- Westernisation of dress; many men have taken to wearing Arab garb, short hair, shaved moustache, and long beards; many have given up insurance and medical aid, and have turned to Islamic banks; Islamic media has flourished (radios, newspapers, and a television channel); and there is a dramatic growth in Muslim and Islamic schools. Theological debate is virtually absent as "truth" has become synonymous with the ulama. To question ulama means questioning the truth (Vahed, 2013, 3).

Purdah, as a work of 'issue theatre', can be contextualised in this environment, where the very questioning of the disabling codes of behaviour imposed on women by customary social and religious practices becomes a challenge to the 'Truth' predicated by the '*ulemā*, inscribed in and through the women's body. The struggle to break free from such suffocating 'panoptic mechanism' of control, then, has to be fought first and foremost *through the body*, in order to expose all its physical brutality - and symbolically annihilating power - the ways, as Ayesha states at the end of the play, Muslim men 'have brutalised their women' (Mahomed, 1993; Graver, 1995, 165). This is perhaps why Mahomed often privileges one- actor stage performances, where the interaction of the performer's body and her voice create a very dynamic stage, a performance charged with the cathartic power of transformation that only (good) theatre can effect. *Purdah* is one of these complex performances where the stage props and the physicality of the actress re-enact an event 'through the woman's body', thus bringing it from the level of factuality and historicity to a more complex level of psychoanalytic depth, almost up to a mystical realm of possible redemption and complete revolution.
According to Jain and Amin, for Muslim women (in India),
[Purdah] has come to express a whole cultural attitude and in India, in some measure, it has come to stand for the dividing line between tradition and modernity. [. . .] Purdah defines the limits of freedom, it demarcates the confines, it outlines the margins. These are the margins which confer anonymity and erase selfhood, the margins which limit and stultify and annihilate (1995, vii).

Inheriting 'the complex value structures associated with the word tradition' (ibid.), the word *purdah* signifies a complex world, an enclosed space where women live hidden from society and where their 'selfhood' is erased in order for her to become that perfect 'ornament of the house' prescribed by the 'wise men'.

In Ismail Mahomed's *Purdah,* Ayesha is presented as a young Muslim girl both 'physically attractive and intelligent' (Graver, 1999, 155), a potentially disastrous combination as women are supposed to become simple decorations, ornaments of men's houses, deprived of   a will of their own. Intelligence thus appears as a characteristic that Mahomed inserts to warn the audience that 'we are set for trouble'. Whilst the story is narrated by Ayesha, the playwright avoids turning it into a monologue by having the protagonist switching roles and personality through the use of her body and stage props. She is the main narrating voice but, at the same time, she also lends her body and her voice to all the other characters that compose the story and make up her world: she is herself as an adolescent girl, then her mother as   a submissive woman, her father as the face of the patriarchal power, her aunt as the annoying, tradition-bound woman - sold to the system and a dutiful mercenary of it - her husband as an obtuse 'male' whose only performance is restricted to carnal acts devoid of any romance or intimacy, her mother in law, another stultified subject ready to uphold the patriarchal system. Finally, Ayesha presents the character of Ridwaan, her husband's best friend who becomes her lover and, at the end, her lawyer. The abandonment to Ridwaan's embrace, the orgasmic pleasure she feels (that her husband had never been able to stir), the realisation of the possibility of happiness as a 'woman' put Ayesha   in touch with her deeper Self, the one which had been so far kept in *purdah*. From this cage set open emerges a new Ayesha, a woman whose subjectivity cannot be annihilated any longer: she is ready to kill her oppressor, ready to commit herself to public condemnation in order to allow the Truth to be unveiled. In doing so, she is actively performing both her social reality and her socially- caged subjectivity, and then, slowly as the performance unfolds, her body (under the voyeuristic gaze of the 'guards' in the audience) undergoes a transformation: it becomes a performed site of contestation.

As the play progresses, it preserves a dramatic tension that strongly impacts the spectators as it presents a personal story peculiar to one 'individual' woman (Ayesha), and yet it conveys a sociological and historical account of the plight of 'Muslim Indian' women, setting the stage for a debate on collective terms. Refraining from allegory, *Purdah* is not a 'fable which by itself has no truth either fantastic or direct [. . .] made for the demonstration of some moral truth' (Pirandello, 1925, in Bentley, 1952, 7). In Pirandello's concept of the 'naked mask,' the dialectic relationship between the actor and the characters portrayed is crucial. The actress cannot put on only Ayesha's mask, but steps into other roles whilst never losing her character of 'Ayesha'. She has to act 'herself' while enacting the 'Other', an extremely complex task that sets her into a journey of discovery of her inhibited and silenced possible 'selves'. Rather than in a moral fable, the spectators find

themselves engaged in a sort of 'mythology of estrangement' where Ayesha recognises her-Self in multiple bodies, as a split subjectivity in the perennial struggle to return to unity and wholeness.

Ayesha reclaims her freedom by murdering her husband Ahmed, stabbing to the core the phallocratic system that has enslaved her. She does so when she discovers that Ahmed has decided to take a co-wife, since Ayesha has not given him any children (he ignores that she has aborted their baby). Before taking this drastic and dramatic decision, Ayesha attempts to commit suicide:

Flashback: Frustratingly, Ayesha wraps herself in her Hejab. She picks up the knife and moves to sit on the prayer mat. She raises her hand as in prayer and then attempts to slit her wrists. As she does so, the children's laughter rings outside. Ayesha hides the knife under the bed and dashes to the window. The children outside sing "Here comes the bride." As song fades, dissolves into the present (Graver, 1999, 164).

After witnessing a procession of children, parading a bride carrying a 'bouquet made of thorns and sharp twigs' (ibid.), Ayesha goes to sit on the bed. That very night, she kills Ahmed. The actions seem to unfold very quickly now, as we proceed towards the end of the play: time is diluted and conflated in the moments of memory and desire, to the point that we are left always floating in-between the present and the past, between dreams of a different life ahead and memories of crushed desires and crumbled possible happy 'pasts' that have not materialised. '*Purdah*,' as Graver (1999, 154) has argued, 'exemplifies well Mahomed's ability to turn monologue into theatre.' In fact, Ayesha never fails to engage the spectator in a complex performance of roles:

The woman's words do not simply flow from her mouth to the ears of the audience. They circle and are caught by the objects surrounding her. Her words draw her towards particular concrete things, making the story corporeal as her body comes into play with her physical surroundings. Her movements and actions lead, in turn, to the creation of tableaux among the props. Torn pictures, scattered sugar, and rearranged possessions leave a trace of the narrative that has passed through her body upon the scene she inhabits (Graver, 1999, 155).

Ayesha, her mother and her despotic aunt all represent different aspects of 'femininity' casted in a gynophobic world, where women's sexuality is utterly controlled and women's subjectivity suppressed, through a symbolic and real 'curtailing' of women's space of agency and decision-making. All the women that the actress enacts (through the multiple

performances of 'actress-playing-Ayesha-playing her aunty or her mother') seem to portray three aspects of femininity, each one incomplete and complementary to the others. What they seem to have in common is the submission to the Law of the Father, a set of rules established, as Dharker puts it, by 'a horde of dead men' (1997, 18) that make sure the women are kept in a perpetual state of compliance:

Whatever we did,
The trail was the same:
The tear- stained mother,
the gossip aunts looking for shoots to smother
Inside all our cracks

(Dharker, in Cakraborty, 2013, 80).

Even Ridwaan, the man who seems to open up a possibility of rebellion through love and companionship, wishes Ayesha to plead 'guilty'. At the end, she refers to him as 'my lawyer'. Ridwaan is swiftly re-consigned to a codified function, that of a simple lawyer of a disgraced Muslim woman. He actually never performed more than a functional role in the diegetic economy of the narrative, remaining from his first appearance up to the end just 'an interpreter' between two semiotic systems that are at work in the play: on one side, Ridwaan knows the *episteme* on which rests the discourse of oppression of women like Ayesha (thus he perhaps condescends to her desire as an act of mercy); on the other side, he – as an educated South African citizen (and a lawyer at that) - also knows very well 'the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within [. . .] a field of scientificity [. . .] (Foucault, 1980, 197). As a mediator between wor(l)ds, Ridwaan masters both languages that regulate these two epistemological sets of norms through different – albeit both androcentric – systems of 'justice': one based on the customary - and (allegedly) religious - laws that regulate the Indian Muslim community of Lenasia, and the other codified through the legal norms that order his nation-state. Ridwaan is the man of the Law of the Father in his double and most duplicitous meaning: in both systems, Ayesha's 'truth' (*aletheia*) will never be acknowledged. According to both 'legal' codes, Ayesha is guilty of murder. She will be consigned either to jail or to death, but she believes that God will recognise her innocence. Whilst refusing to bend in front of those men who have sanctioned such cruel laws, *making* her into a murderer, Ayesha does not step outside the community of the believers and asks to her merciful God for forgiveness. As Imtiaz Dharker hints in her poetry, there seems to

be some kind of ephemeral peace in giving space to religious rituals and confidence in the help of Allah:

In the evening I cleanse my mouth. There is no help but Allah
And the rituals:
Wash the hands to the elbows,
A fluttering of fingertips,
A kind of peace.

(Dharker, in Cakraborty, 2013, 28).

However, for Ayesha this peace can come only after murdering the system to the core, cutting that masculine honour that, as Shahnaz Khan has highlighted, is based on 'the sexual and social control of women perpetuated by their own families and communities' (2002, 37). This is perhaps why she chooses to kill Ahmed rather than killing herself, and why she murders him during sexual intercourse. So doing, Ayesha performs a de-construction (and a radical destruction) of the Law of the Father inscribed in the phallocentric socio-symbolic system of patriarchy. Such a system is made almost unchallengeable by the constant recourse to a religious discourse based on an androcentric reading of the *Qur'ān*, where the signifier 'woman' is tied to a signified that implies 'lack', 'inferiority' and consequent dependence on men. By the end of the play, however, 'Ayesha- the- Muslim- Indian- Woman' comes to *re*-signify her-Self, advocating for a new semiotic reading of the *Qur'ān* and reversing the linguistic and symbolic shackles that had kept her subjectivity in a state of passive subjugation and seclusion. In this sense, *Purdah* is a drama of powerful resonance, as it does not contest religion *per se*, but rather challenges the 'reading' of the text, its misled exegesis that Ayesha proclaims biased and ultimately contrary to the will of her Merciful God, the ultimate legislator and judge of human behaviour.

In *Purdah*, Ayesha defies the reign of terror imposed upon women, reversing the violence and directing it against men, spilling the male's blood in an upturned rite of passage that signs her coming back to life. If, in Dacia Maraini's play 'I sogni di Clitennestra' ('Klytemnestra's dreams', 1981), the protagonist fails to kill her husband and is driven to madness and suicide, '[d]efeated anew in history, [giving] up the dream of being herself and of being another – of having a self that can accommodate multiplicity and otherness' (Komar, 2003, 19), in *Purdah*, Ayesha accomplishes this dream: she conquers a new voice

that is now loudly shouting to the other women to wake up and stop staring at a mirror where they look just like 'an image, a mute image' (Maraini, 1981, 10).

Conclusions

It is the women who know you can take in the invader,
Time after time, and still be whole.
Whether they enter with loaded guns, Or kind words, you are quite intact.
The fact is, each one has a borderline that cannot be erased.
Every borderline becomes a battlefield,
And every night an act of faith

(Dharker, 1989).

As we become increasingly wary of signifiers like 'identity', 'subjectivity', 'sensibility', 'men' and 'women', the play *Purdah* by Ismail Mahomed is one of those works of drama and 'issue theatre' that forces us – through narrativity and performativity - to engage into contested discourses around issues like gender, race, religion, migration, human rights, sexuality, diversity, to name just a few.

Although Lenasia's community has moved a long way forward from the times of the first indentured labourers, surviving apartheid and carving a space for the 'Indians' in South Africa, there are still many problems to be faced. As Goolam Vahed has reported.

Many Muslims are retreating to an Islamic identity in their private lives and constructing boundaries around various points of contact: between men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, Muslims and the state, Islam and secularism, and so on. In introducing new and tighter Islamic codes in the public and private domains, Muslims are using the new freedoms of a secular state to redefine the kind of Muslims they want to be (2013, 3).

Whilst many educated Indian Muslims in South Africa are challenging forms of radical Islam, trying to reconcile the freedoms and the rights guaranteed by the state with their religious tenets, 'more conservative interpretations of Islam became institutionalised' (Vahed, 2013, 2). Capitalising on the possibilities offered by the Rainbow Nation,[15] where education for all immediately became one of the leading mantras, both state-run schools and religious educational institutions have thrived in Johannesburg and in other major cities of the South African state (Reetz, 2011, 84). The freedoms guaranteed by a democratic

constitution, though, paradoxically are also making space for other 'undemocratic' - even unconstitutional - practices that policy- makers and human rights advocates have repeatedly highlighted as problematic and in need of a quick and stable resolution.[16]

More plays like *Purdah* may be necessary, more theatrical performances are needed to engage the audiences in a critical debate over the role of Islam – and religion in general – in a modern and secular society. Moreover, as the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker and the plays of Ismail Mahomed prove, we need to listen to the voices of those who *inhabit* the diasporic worlds of South Asian communities around the world, in order to avoid coming up with patronising and misleading readings of socio-cultural and religious situations that we apprehend only as 'onlookers', or, at best, as scholars of these complex and ever-changing cultures. Briefly, we need to be 'partakers' and not just spectators of the events in order to engage with them in an effective and durable way.

NOTES

[1]   'Purdah' is a word of Persian origin which literally means 'veil' or 'curtain'. It designates the practice of secluding women from contact with men, except immediate family relations (father, brother, husband, son). As Elisabeth H. White has pointed out, 'Purdah is more than wearing the veil, [. . .] It is a complex of customs based on the concept of family honor, and designed to maintain the sexual purity of women' (White, 1977, 31). Although in India such custom was originally restricted to upper caste Hindu women and Muslims, some scholars have highlighted how the veil and the practice   of purdah are becoming more widespread among Muslim diasporic communities in South Africa. (Vahed, 2002; 2013).

[2]   Imtiaz Dharker is a Pakistani poet, born in Lahore (1956) and currently living in the UK. I read her poems against the play by Ismail Mahomed, since I find that both Dharker and Mahomed universalise the plight of women subjected to patriarchal customary laws, while refraining to assume a Eurocentric stance against Islam as the main cause of the subjection of Muslim women. It is not religion *per se* or a particular set of clothes that trap women in a state of submission, but rather a 'purdah of the mind'. I thus find that both the poems by Dharker and the play by Mahomed reflect the same spirit of deep awareness, commitment to spirituality and refusal of bending to patriarchal laws that are designed to keep women's minds in seclusion (*purdah*).

³ Ismail Mahomed is the director of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival. Born in Johannesburg in 1959, Mahomed has worked in the arts industry for most of his professional life. In 1987, he founded the Creative Arts Workshop (CAW) in Lenasia, Johannesburg's largest South Asian community. A prolific writer and arts critic, Mahomed has contributed to South African theatre in a very incisive way, as the many awards can testify. He can boast of an extensive portfolio of arts based projects and participation to many international festivals.

⁴ Lenasia is approximately 35 kilometres southwest of the Johannesburg central business district. Whilst today it is a vibrant and thriving suburb located to the south of Soweto, it was first built as a ghetto for the Indian community of Johannesburg. Located close to a military camp (the Lenz Base), its name derives from the words 'Lenz' plus 'Asia', as the majority of its first residents were Indian migrants forcefully removed (under the Apartheid Government's Group Areas Act) from non-racial areas located more closely to Johannesburg. Today Lenasia is a township with a particular Indian flavour: since 2002, the community has a website where people post and advertise the major events that take place in this South Asian diasporic community. See http:// www.lenzinfo.co.za

⁵ I use the word 'poiesis' in the way the Greeks understood it. As Giorgio Agamben has explained, The Greeks, to whom we owe all the categories through which we judge ourselves and the reality around us, made a clear distinction between *poiesis* (*poiein*, "to pro-duce" in the sense of bringing into being) and *praxis* (*prattein*, "to do" in the sense of acting). [C]entral to praxis was the idea of the will that finds its immediate expression in an act, while, by contrast, central to *poiesis* was the experience of production into presence, the fact that something passed from nonbeing to being, from concealment into the full light of the work. *The essential character of poiesis was not its aspect as a practicaland voluntary process but it's being a mode of truth understood as unveiling, ἀ- λήθειά (1999, 42).*

⁶ For an analysis of the three main representatives of French psycholinguistic feminism, see Cetorelli (2010).

⁷ 'In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said . . . From this point of view, it seems that certain feminist demands revive a kind of naïve romanticism, a belief in identity [which is] the reverse of phallocratism.'
Excerpt from 'La femme, ce n'est jamais ça' ['Woman Can Never Be Defined'], an interview by 'psychoanalysis and politics' printed in Tel quel, Autumn 1974, later in

Polylogue (1977), Paris: Seuil, 23-54. Quoted in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds) (1981) New French Feminisms. New York: Schocken Books, 137-138.

[8]   Hélène Cixous, in her famous essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', advocated an écriture feminine in order to 'break up, destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project.'

For Cixous,
Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement (1990, 316).

[9]   The 'theatre of the oppressed' is a theoretical framework and a set of techniques developed by the Brazilian director, artist and activist Augusto Boal. He went on to devise a form of theatre for social change that could have strong political impact also at a legislative level. See http://theforumproject.org

[10]   Victor Turner has often described the akin modalities of ritual and theatrical performances in generating moments of collective reflexivity. As he has argued, 'Essentially, public reflexivity takes the form of a performance' (Turner, 1979, 465).

[11]   All the quotations from the play Purdah are based on the script by Ismail Mahomed published in Graver (1999, 154-165).

[12]   South Africa is in the process of fully recognising the marriages convened under religious laws (Muslim family laws and Hindu family laws). In 2014, more than one hundred Imams graduated as 'marriage officers', a position that allows them to perform the Muslim rites as public officers, so that   the marriage could be recorded on the National Population Register and receive the full legal status afforded by the country's Constitution. In May 2014, during the ceremony for awarding the diplomas to the first graduated Imams in Cape Town, the Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe reportedly said:

As a result of the Imams being designated as marriage officers in terms of the Marriages Act (25) of 1961, the registration of Muslim unions will accord Muslim marriages legal status and with that, the protective instruments of the secular state may be accessed to

ensure that these Qur'anic values are realised and complied with within the Constitutional state.

See 'Full legal status for Muslim marriages in South Africa', accessible from: http://www.southafrica.info/services/rights/muslim-020514.htm#. vem5imBLdbw#ixzz3kmhTKlqg

[13]   '[*Rasic* performances] insist on sharing experiences with partakers and participants; works that try to evoke both terror and celebration. Such performances are often very personal even as they are no longer private' (Schechner, 2003, 358).

[14]   There is a very hot debate going on inside the Muslim 'community of the believers' regarding certain quotes and sentences of the Quran that may (or may not) justify a rigid application of the seclusion and segregation of women in *purdah*. In 1939, Maulana Abul A'la Maududi's published his famous work *Purdah*, which, as his translator posits, 'has deeply influenced vast sections of the reading public in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent.' According to his followers, this book (translated also in Arabic as *Al-Hejab*), 'more than any other, has in recent years helped people to understand clearly the nature of the correct relationship between man and woman in the social life, and appreciate the great design that Nature wills to fulfil through them on the earth' (Maulana Abul A'la Maududi, 1939, 18).see   https://jamaat.org/en/documents/Al-Hijab_and_the_Status   _of_ Women_in_Islam.pdf

[15]   The 'Rainbow Nation' is a definition of South Africa coined by Desmond Tutu to signify a country made of many diverse peoples, languages and cultures harmoniously living together side by side like the colours of a rainbow. http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-04-17/rainbow-nation-   betrayed-by-attacks-on-immigrants-in-south-africa

[16]   As Vahed has reported, in 1996 in Cape Town, under the banner of Islam, a 'movement of political radicalism was formed "People Against Gangsterism and Drugs" (Pagad) [. . .] to fight the scourge of drugs and gangsterism. Pagad drew on elements in Islamic religious sources — without regard   to historic context — that emphasised the believer's imperative to oppose indecency and crime through direct action to achieve a just and morally correct society' (Vahed, 2013, 2).

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