

Looking through the Purdah

Purdah: An Anthology

by Eunice de Souza;
Oxford University Press,
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INDRANI SEN

One feature of colonial India was debates pertaining to gendered social practices like child-marriage, polygamy, female infanticide, oppressive high-caste widowhood and purdah. Purdah or female seclusion, observed by upper caste/class Hindus and Muslims was the practice of keeping women hidden behind the veil, away from public gaze. Of course, unlike many other reform issues, purdah could not be addressed through legislation but only through debate and discussion. While progressive Indian and western thinkers urged its gradual removal, conservative sections argued for its continuation. It is against this backdrop of intense and sometimes bitter debate and discussion on purdah in colonial India that one must approach the volume under review.

Purdah: An Anthology attempts to capture diverse perspectives on the subject through a sampling of letters, memoirs, sociological studies, novels, short stories and poetry drawn from the 19th and 20th centuries. The nearly 50 excerpts taken from published sources are arranged under four broad sections.

Western Perceptions

The opening section "Western Perceptions", presents colonial writings predominantly by colonial administrators, their wives, as well as by travellers, missionaries, physicians and a few "Indianised" white women. It includes passages from Louis Roussellet, J K H Denny, Monier-Williams, Lepel Griffin, Colin Mackenzie, Lady Dufferin, Annie Besant, Frieda Hauswirth and Charlotte Wiser, among others. A surprising inclusion is of the two leading historians of our time, Meredith Borthwick and Gail Minault – a point we shall return to later.

Although the editor's Introduction does not really mention this, the British in India were deeply curious about life behind the veil, an arena that was jealously guarded by colonised men against the coloniser's

gaze. Since access to it was available only to women, white women's writings often carried accounts of a visit to the zenana.

Foremost among Europeans in possessing first-hand experience of purdah were women missionaries who entered the zenanas and interacted with women under purdah as teachers, reformers or physicians. Disappointingly enough, missionary accounts included here are limited to those by Edward Storrow and Marcus Fuller. More female missionary writings would have further enriched this collection especially since their male counterparts had no direct experience of the zenana.

While *pauca memsahibs* did not have much to do with purdah, there was always the exceptional white woman who did write knowledgeably on the subject – most notably Fanny Parks with her celebrated revelations of life inside princely zenanas, from which a very brief extract is included in this section.

One of the more interesting accounts by a white woman is that by Meer Hassan Ali, an Englishwoman who married an Indian and lived as a 'purdahnashin' in early 19th century Lucknow. However, while she describes in great detail general features of 'zenannah' life such as the daily routine, food habits, entertainment, style of dress, room furnishings, the interiors and so on, she is disappointingly silent about her own personal experiences. Nothing is revealed about any possible cultural clash or personal difficulties she faced and her critique of the system is barely hinted at: "As the bird from the nest immured in a cage is both cheerful and contented, so are these females" (p 13).

While almost all the western writings are critical of female seclusion, it is interesting to note how the category of "western perceptions" gets complicated in the writings of someone like Sister Nivedita. Born as Margaret Noble and thus technically an Englishwoman who later became a Hindu female monk, her writing presents one of the most heartfelt "Indian" defences of purdah.

Historically, purdah was associated with an entire gamut of problems, including the tyranny of the mother-in-law, early motherhood and female health. Health concerns were often voiced by doctors and medical missionaries and diseases like tuberculosis leading to enhanced female mortality were viewed as a fallout of female seclusion. This aspect of health is touched upon by Kathleen Olga Vaughan, a physician who worked in Kashmir. She points out the high

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