

A Feminist Understanding of Jameela Nishat's Play "Purdah"

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Jameela Nishat is a published feminist poet and playwright who has had a formal training in English Literature and theatre arts and also hails from an artistic background - her father was an acclaimed portrait artist and an acquaintance of the renowned painter, M.F. Hussain; thus, her initiation with the arts began at an early age. Nishat's literature degree introduced her to many poets, of which she chiefly quotes Plath and Dickinson as having a major impact on her thinking and writing process. It is often said that you cannot separate the aesthetic consciousness of a poet (the word 'poet' here is used in a generic sense to refer to litterateurs as a whole, rather than just poets in the strict sense of the term) from his/her moral values; that is, his/her own personal volitions, views and response to their immediate political surroundings ultimately finds a place in their works. The same could be said of Nishat. One of the causes which is close to Nishat's heart has got to do with her personal identity as a woman hailing from a rather puritanical Muslim background. The predominant theme in most of her poems and plays is to shed light and throw light on the experience of Muslim, especially those belonging to the more orthodox sects. She observes that there is negligible writing both in her mother tongue Urdu, as well as English about the authentic experience of Muslim women. Hence she makes it a point to showcase it in her plays. Her plays are a carefully balanced critique of the oppression that women from the Muslim community face within their household and neighborhood, but she is at the same time consciously wary of the fact that she should not indulge in borderline generalizations, thereby promoting Islam phobia and the idea that all Muslim women are oppressed. Because in some parts of the world, Islamic women consider it a matter of pride to wear the hijab and see it as a means of asserting one's unique cultural identity. In fact, she works towards removing the stigma associated with the identity of being a Muslim woman, ultimately aiming at communal harmony. Apart from the aforementioned strands of her works, a major characteristic of Nishat's canon is that, in all her works, a conscious effort can be seen on the part of the writer to infuse her works with the local dialect, another cause which is close to her heart. By including words from Dakhni Urdu, which is often degraded as a colloquial form of the language, she seeks to popularize it as opposed to the usual Persianised form of Urdu, which is more widely recognized

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than the former. Nishat has three collections of poetry to her credit – *Lava* (2000), *Lamhey Ki Ankh* (2002) and *Lams Ki Sawghat* (2006). In the year 2000, she also edited *Inkeshaf*, an anthology of forty women poets from the Deccan. Also, Nishat's works have been widely translated and featured in several notable anthologies, including the famous anthology edited and compiled by Susie Tharu and K.Lalita titled *Women's Writing in India*. Apart from this, she also holds a portfolio of running an NGO for women called 'Shaheen Resource Center for Women', based in Telangana which actively seeks to uplift and provide small-scale employment to women belonging to orthodox Muslim sects. The play *Purdah*, taken up here for discussion, forms a part of a collection of plays exclusively by women playwrights from all across the Indian subcontinent, titled, *Staging Resistance*, edited and put together by Tutun Mukherjee. The play is written in a conversational tone and revolves around the light-hearted banter of a group of teenage girls in a local Muslim school. Though the play calls into question certain serious issues pertaining to womenfolk, it is also interspersed with gentle humor in places. Through the conversations that Zubeida, Muskan and the other girls have with each other, we get to understand and are made to empathize with the struggles that these girls have to go through on a daily basis. Though the play specifically deals with the condition of Muslim women and the travails that they go through owing to restrictive religious dogma, it has also managed to address the problems faced by womankind in general and not just those belonging to the Muslim community. It could, in a way, said to be evocative of what Bell Hooks arrives at in her essay, *Shaping Feminist Theory*, where she opines for a genuine bond of sisterhood which is inclusive of the experience of all classes, races, and ethnic minorities of women and not just solely articulating the experience of one particular community. This is evident particularly towards the end of the play, which is rather beautifully presented as a 'mushaira', or a gathering of poets, where the chief poet recites a poem which acts as a clarion call to all women to band together, empower themselves and stand up against the violence and injustices meted out to them. One must be wary enough to notice that in talking about the experiences and problems faced by the Muslim community Nishat does not employ a "rhetoric of commonality" by isolating herself from the problems faced by women belonging to other castes, religions and ethnic groups. Her plays do not negate "the possibility that women will (and should) bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries". (Hooks 1) In other words she does not limit the scope of her understanding of oppression or pigeon-hole herself into thinking that only a certain section of women are oppressed. To put it succinctly, her (Nishat's) aim is not to diminish the struggles faced by non-Muslim women but to present an authentic

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portrayal of their idiosyncratic experiences and more importantly as an attempt to articulate and uncover the prejudice behind certain regressive norms and religious dogmas.

The way the play is structured is key to understanding her worldview. In discussing the problems which are unique to Muslim women (particularly the orthodox sects), Nishat makes use of names for characters: but in delineating problems which all women face regardless of whichever 'label' they are categorized under, there is no name for the characters. These dialogues are mouthed by a chorus of 'Voices' in the play. The play ends on a note of hope, where women will be more vocal, outspoken and raise up against the injustices meted out to them.

The play deals with certain radical issues that hold a lot of contemporary significance in feminist discourse like stalking, eve teasing, objectification of the female body, talaq etc. It strikes at the root of the problem and addresses certain ingrained patriarchal norms that curb the freedom of women. For instance, she manages to weave in a viewpoint which is being talked about only recently in feminist discourse – the idea that if women dress 'modestly' they won't be subjected to sexual harassment or rape. She vehemently calls into question this idea in her play. There is a brief scene in the play where one of the teenage girls, Muskan becomes the victim of eve-teasing and is being cat-called while on her way to school. The following lines are an excerpt from the play of the exchange between Muskan and her friend Zubeida who accompanies her on her daily commute to school –

ZUBEIDA: Come along, the roadside Romeos are always like this... (*The girls walk quickly ahead. The boys follow them, whistling, teasing, and singing songs.*)

MUSKAN: (*Wiping her brow*) Oh, what a hassle.

ZUBEIDA: Walking on the road is a problem these days.

MUSKAN: That's why you should wear a burqua.

ZUBEIDA: Weren't you wearing a burqua? Why did the boys tease you then?
(Mukherjee 541)

The question posed by Zubeida in the above lines becomes central to our argument – the idea that rape and all forms of sexual assault only happen because women wear revealing clothes; if women dress 'modestly' or 'cover themselves up', such crimes can be avoided, which is a flawed notion and is rooted in misogyny and stems from a patriarchal mindset.