UNIT 3 RE-COVERING THE BODY

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Structure

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Objectives

3.3 The Veil in South Asia

3.3.1 Veiling in India

3.3.2 Veil in Indian Women’s Life Narratives and Film

3.3.3 Veiling in Life Narratives from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh

3.3.3.1 Afghanistan

3.3.3.2 Pakistan

3.3.3.3 Bangladesh

3.4 The Veil in Middle Eastern and North African Life Narratives

3.4.1 Socio-Political History of Iran and Veiling

3.4.2 The Veil in the Writings of Iranian Women

3.4.3 The Veil in Life Narratives from Morocco

3.5 Let Us Sum Up

3.6 Unit End Questions

3.7 References

3.8 Suggested Readings

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we will learn about the origin of the custom of veiling in various countries from South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. By examining specific literary works from countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran and Morocco, we will examine how the veil works as a contested space, and how it is embedded in identity politics. We will also discuss how the veil acts as a metaphor in women’s life writing. Many women in their life narratives talk about the veil and how it has been used through the ages to subjugate women both literally and metaphorically. We will see how short-story writers, poets and filmmakers use the veil as a metaphor to reveal women’s degradation in society. At the same time, through the power of their literary skills, they give expression to women’s resistance against oppression in an attempt to ‘re-cover’ the female body and shape it anew.
3.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

• Explain the origin of the veil in different cultures and countries;

• Discuss how the veil has acted as a contested space in the politics of different countries;

• Examine the issues of veiling in women’s life writings from South Asia, Middle East and North Africa; and

• Describe the use of the veil as a metaphor in these writings.

3.3 THE VEIL IN SOUTH ASIA

In this section, we will examine some specific literary works in which the veil plays an important role, against a historical and cultural background. Starting with India, we will then turn to some works from neighboring South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Through our reading of life narratives by women writers from these countries, we will see how veiling has been both a cultural tool of oppression against women, as well as a literary tool used by women writers to contest their subjugation.

3.3.1 Veiling in India

The veil in India was prevalent only among the women of the higher strata of society. The poorer women could not afford to cover their faces because they had to come out into the open for work. We have evidence of this in the ancient texts like the *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* by Kalidasa. The origin of this institution can be traced to the ideal of social prestige which introduced seclusion amongst royal families as also the element of possessiveness among the males of the aristocracy. Women covered their faces from their in-laws and elders as a sign of respect. Women were often regarded as the repositories of honour. Women of the royalty were not to come out into the public. The custom of veil was not only about covering the face but also about maintaining certain decorum such as not talking to strangers especially men, not standing in the doorways, and not looking out of windows.

After the Independence of India, many women came out of the veil and joined the movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. With the formation of the Progressive Writer’s Association, many women writers emerged, including Rasheed Jehan, Ismat Chugtai, Usha Dutt, Razia Sajjad Zaheer, Arpita Das, Shelia Bhatia, Binata Roy, Uma Chakravorty, Sarojini Naidu and so on.
Rasheed Jehan’s story ‘Woh’ included in the volume *Women Writing in India* (1991) edited by K. Lalita and Susie Tharu, shows the crumbling of the secure world of a young upper-middle class woman when she confronts the world of the ‘other one’, a prostitute. Such writings by women urge the modern middle class woman to come out of her comfort zone and face the realities of other worlds, such as that of the working class woman, or the woman who is forced to survive by selling her body.

By the late sixties, gaps in the Nehruvian Mixed economy showed up. Peasants’ revolts emerged in different parts of the country supported by students who left the universities to support the farmers. In Bengal, Bihar and Kerala riots broke up over food shortages. Women who had been silent on the political front after Independence, took active roles in these movements and demanded that women’s questions be included in their agendas, and formed women’s organizations. Writers of the fifties and the sixties are formally accomplished writers. Kamal Desai, Krishna Sobti, Sajda Zaidi, Qurratulain Hyder, Kabita Sinha, Madhavikutty, Gauri Deshpande and Anita Desai were a few of them. During the 1970’s, with decentralization and the coming of age of India’s capitalism, the internationalization of markets and new concerns came up. Writers like Mahasweta Devi have been writing extensively on issues of tribal rights and the ill effects of a free economy under capitalism.

### 3.3.2 The Veil in Indian Women’s Life Narratives and Film

We have many instances of the use of the veil as a metaphor in Indian women’s life narratives. For instance, Rama Mehta’s novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977) talks about a liberated and educated young woman Geeta who, following her marriage into a very traditional family in Udaipur, enters the *haveli* as a bride. Spanning a period of fifteen years, the book traces the accommodation of Geeta to the ways of the *haveli*. The women she meets inside the *haveli* never leave the *haveli*’s enclosed walls except for a chat with the other women in the other *haveli*. They spend their time cooking, buying saris and wearing them to social gatherings, overseeing endless servants and gossiping. In the midst of all this noise, Geeta longs for a moment of solitude. She also wishes to educate the children of the maids, thus going against the norms of the day and indicating the *haveli*’s decline.

The setting of the movie *Water* by Deepa Mehta is the India of the 1930s. When the protagonist’s husband dies, she becomes a burden to the family. Deepa Mehta exposes the ills of the practice of child marriage which was still the order of the day. Widows lived in ashrams, in close confinement and in austerity, and sometimes even prostituted. In this case, Chuiya, a child widow, is left in an ashram by her father after her husband’s death. She has been unable to understand why she was being left there. Chuiya
Re-Covering the Body

befriends everyone in the ashram with the vitality of a child; flitting from room to room she discovers a new world in each woman. Outside, the sacred river Ganges flows indifferent, symbolizing a society which pays little concern to the plight of these women. But change is in the air. A young man takes notice of Kalyani, the beautiful widow, and wishes to marry her. Tough change is in the air, the ashram faces a tragedy when Kalyani has to go for prostitution, her client being the father of the young man who wishes to marry her. Chuiya too meets a terrible end.

We have seen through these examples how the veil has been playing a pivotal role in the lives of Indian women since ancient times and how the scene is not changing even in contemporary times. However, writers, film makers and social activists have been trying their best to address the issue through their works.

Ismat Chughtai

Next, let us look at one specific example of a writer whose use of the veil as a metaphor in her literary writing gained her much fame. In a previous Unit of this programme (see MWG 001, Block 6, Unit 2) you have already come across a discussion of the well-known short story, “Lihaaf” (“The Quilt”) by Ismat Chughtai (1994). The story is also examined in the next Block of this course (Block 4, Unit 4) from the perspective of queer life narratives. As you will observe, in this story, the veil is used as a metaphor which both conceals and reveals women’s sexual desires in a repressive society. Here, let us look at another short story by the same author in which the veil is employed as a central image.

In another one of her short stories from the same collection, entitled “The Veil”, Ismat Chughtai describes the fate of Goribi, an eighty year old virgin. Written in the voice of a first person narrator, the short story describes the tragic fate of Goribi who gets engaged at the young age of fourteen to Kale Mian, the narrator’s uncle. In a culture which prizes ‘fairness,’ and denigrates people with dark skin, Goribi’s seventeen year old husband who is “unusually sensitive about his inky complexion” (Chughtai, 1994, p. 1), finds himself so overwhelmed by his young bride’s legendary beauty that he is unable to lift the veil from her face on his wedding night. Weighed down by the burden of a tradition in which the bride is too ashamed to lift her own veil, both of the newlyweds remain frozen and incapacitated to take charge of their entangled destinies. Despite the husband’s repeated commands to his wife to lift her veil, Goribi finds herself unable to do so, forcing her Kale Mian to interpret her refusal as an arrogant defiance (Chughtai, 1994, p. 1). Some years later, when Goribi is a young woman of twenty one, the scene is repeated under the watchful encouragement of family members, all of whom are waiting for the marriage to be consummated. However,
Inscribing the Body Through Life Narratives

Goribi’s misplaced sense of honour and shame, and her husband’s deep-seated insecurities, once more prevent the happy beginning of a married life to which both of them are secretly looking forward. As before, Goribi’s husband literally jumps out of the marital home by leaping out of the window and disappears from her life for the next thirty years. The scene which follows, at the end of the story, marks the tragic end to two lives crushed under societal repression - the husband dies due to diseases acquired from living a life of debauchery, while Goribi replaces her wedding veil with the shroud of a widow. An excerpt from the ending of the story is provided below:

After leading a life of indiscriminate debauchery, Kale Mian had returned home burdened with disease. On his deathbed he requested that Goribi come to him so that he could die in peace.

When she received Kale Mian’s message, Goribi leaned against a pillar for a long time, unmoving and silent. Then, going to her old trunk, she took out her tattered wedding suit and put it on, applied bridal oil to some of her grey hair and, her long veil cradled between her hands, she arrived at the side of the dying patient.

“Lift your veil,” Kale Main whispered convulsively.

Goribi’s trembling hands reached up toward her veil, and fell.

Kale Mian had taken his last breath.

That very moment Goribi calmly sat down on the floor beside his bed, smashed her glass bangles against the bedpost, and instead of the bridal veil, pulled the white veil of widowhood over her head.

(Chughtai, 1994, p. 4)

Ismat Chughtai approaches the subjects of her narratives with a feminist empathy towards both female and male characters, who are chained down by the symbolic veiling imposed upon their individual aspirations for love, sexuality and emotional fulfillment. At the same time, as you can see from her stories, she uses a satirical and critical style to mock the social mores of societies which use ‘tradition’ as a burial shroud under which women and men die slow deaths. In order to obtain a deeper familiarity with Ismat Chughtai’s use of the veil as a metaphor in life narratives, you are encouraged to read some of her other stories from her collection *The Quilt and Other Stories* (1994).
Check Your Progress:

Discuss how and why the custom of veil was prevalent in India in old times? Do you see any changes in this practice in recent times? Name some women writers who have been associated with such changes.

Activity:

Read “The Veil’ and “Lihaaf” (“The Quilt”) by Ismat Chughtai and describe in your own words, her use of the veil as a literary tool in these short stories.
Inscribing the Body Through Life Narratives

3.3.3 Veiling in Life Narratives from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh

Above, we have examined the use of the veil in life narratives from India. Now, let us look at the literary representation of veiling in the context of some other South Asian countries. We will begin with Afghanistan and then turn to two other neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

3.3.3.1 Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, more than anywhere else in the world, women along with their men believe that they belong to the house, that they should not be seen by the outside world and hence should be veiled. The Taliban banned women from attending schools or hold up any job. Many women have been brutally murdered who were believed to have flouted the rules penned down by the Taliban.

Zoya’s Story: An Afghan Woman’s Struggle for Freedom

In the book *Zoya’s Story: An Afghan Woman’s Struggle for Freedom*, Zoya is an eye witness to the horrors the Taliban spread all over Afghanistan. The story begins with her encounter with a Russian lady soldier. Then she describes her mother, a liberal and educated woman who goes to the university and who first introduced her to the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan. She also adores her father who taught her to fly kites and the Persian language. Zoya was devastated when her parents were kidnapped and killed by the warlords one after the other. Zoya eloped to Quetta with her grandmother who used to spinning tales out of the biology and chemistry books of her father where she meets a Russian journalist and her name was changed to Zoya after the daughter of the journalist who happened to die of cancer. At sixteen she joined RAWA and started writing articles for their journal. When the Taliban took power in 1996 women were ordered to wear veils in the streets. They could go out only with a male relative. Women were banned from working or to go to schools. Zoya returned to Kabul to write about the atrocities of the Taliban against women. She also wrote about the women in refugee camps in Peshawar where she ran a school for the girls. She describes how difficult to convince the fathers of these girls to send their daughter to the school who would rather engage them in carpet-weaving.

3.3.3.2 Pakistan

*We Sinful Women*

Urdu poetry, with its well-established and world famous forms such as the ghazal, is part of a long literary tradition in South Asia, especially in Pakistan and India. Although traditionally dominated by male poets, some of whom gained so much fame that they became household names in these...
countries (for instance, Mir, Ghalib and Faiz, among many others), the tradition of Urdu poetry has also provided a platform for women poets to explore the different forms, experiment with these forms, and give expression to ideas and feelings which capture the lives lived by women in these cultures. Since the veil, or purdah, is commonly observed by many women in Pakistan, we often find it appearing as a recurring motif in verse written by women poets. In contemporary Pakistan, some of the well-known poets such as Kishwar Naheed, Ishrat Aafreen and Fahmida Riaz, have turned to the metaphor of the veil to express their resistance to, and struggle against, social customs which they deem to be oppressive. In a collection entitled We Sinful Women (1991), Rukhsana Ahmad (who is the editor and the translator of the collection), brought together many of these well-known poets and provided a bilingual edition of some of the most startling poems penned by these women. With the original poems written in Urdu presented on the left side pages, and the English translations on facing pages, the collection provides us with a rich treasury of verse by contemporary Pakistani women, and a window into the literary world created by them.

Let us look at a few examples from this collection (you are encouraged to read the rest of the poems on your own in order to get a broader perspective on the variety of themes and styles used by the poets).

Here is an excerpt from the poem “Chadur and Diwari” by Fahmida Riaz:

Sire! What is this black chadur to me?
A thousand mercies, why do you reward me with this?

I am not in mourning that I should wear this
To flag my grief to the world
I am not a sinner, nor a criminal,
That I should stamp my forehead with its darkness
...
Sire, do be so kind
Do not give me this black chadur
With this black chadur cover the shroudless body lying
in your chamber
For the stench that emanates from that body
Walks huffed and breathless in every alleyway
Bangs her head on every door frame
Covering her nakedness
...
Not I, but you need this chadur now
...
These four walls, this *chadur* I wish upon the rotting carcass
In the open air, her sails flapping, my ship races ahead
I am the companion of the new Adam
Who has earned my self-assured love.

(Fahmida Riaz cited in Rukhsana Ahmad, 1988, p. 91)

As is evident from the above poem, the *chadur* or veil with which the female narrator of Fahmida Riaz’s poem is forced to cover her body, is perceived by her as a *diwari*, a prison-wall within the confines of which she is forced to suffocate and die. But rather than suffering in silence, the narrator of the poem expresses bold resistance against patriarchal oppression by claiming that it is no longer she who needs this *chadur*. Rather, it is the patriarchal male who needs to use it to cover the decaying and rotting body lying in his chamber - that of the carcass of womanhood. In comparison to this rotting carcass, the poet imagines herself as a free spirit, “her sails flapping” forging ahead on a ship in the ocean of freedom (Riaz cited in Ahmad, 1988, p. 91).

We can find a similar resistance against the corporeal and spiritual oppression of veiling in many of the other poems in this collection of Urdu poetry. *Ishrat Aafreen*, for instance, in her poem “Migration” speaks of a “silken girl from the tribe of Stones” who has “imprisoned herself in the towers of tradition/ In a charmed palace of self-deception” (Aafreen in Ahmad, 1988, p. 147). In one of her *ghazals*, she similarly describes a veiled persona who is hidden inside her body, and who seeks liberation: “Hidden inside me lives this delicate girl/ Strange aspect, strange passions she has, this girl” (Aafreen cited in Ahmad, 1988, p. 167).

In the title poem of the collection, “We Sinful Women”, *Kishwar Naheed* draws sharp contrasts between the bold and courageous women who are seen as ‘sinful’ because of their open resistance to patriarchy, and those who wear the ‘gowns’ of authority and see themselves as the keepers of tradition. With the sharpness of her literary skills, Naheed tears to shreds the veils of hypocrisy beneath which patriarchal forces hide themselves, to proudly declare -

> It is we sinful women
> who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns
> who don’t sell our lives
> who don’t bow our heads
> who don’t fold our hands together.

(Naheed cited in Ahmad, 1988, p. 31)
The excerpts provide for you above are only a small fragment of the many treasures you will find in this collection, and elsewhere in other poems by contemporary Pakistani women poets. Slowly, but surely, these poets have carved out for themselves, and for all women, a distinct space in the literary canon of Urdu poetry, conventionally defined and reigned over by male voices. In the words of the Rukhsana Ahmad, the editor of the collection we have discussed, “the self-appointed arbiters of taste are still men. They define the literary canons, build or wreck reputations, and, by largely ignoring women’s writing, marginalise it” (Ahmad, 1988, p. 6). The verse of the Pakistani women poets is clear evidence of the transformation of the Urdu literary canon and the unveiling of brave, new voices by women who are countering patriarchal oppression.

3.3.3.3 Bangladesh
Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) was born in a small village in the Rangpur district of what is present day Bangladesh. Her father was a well-educated landlord who encouraged all of his children to be well-versed in languages, especially the ‘elite’ languages of the time - Persian and Arabic. Rokeya Hossain, like many young Muslim girls of the time, got married at the early age of sixteen. Her husband, an educated man himself, encouraged her to study and read and write in Bengali, which was the language of the common people. Her first essay, “Pipasa”, written in Bengali, was published in 1902. This was followed by various other short stories and novels, which established her as a leading feminist writer of the early 20th century. Her writings, including Sultana’s Dream (originally published in 1905), clearly show her to be someone who had firm beliefs in the value of education as a way of promoting gender equality. After her husband’s death in 1909, she established a high school for girls in his memory. The school provided education to many young girls and remains a popular educational institution till date. Hossain’s interest and efforts towards promoting education, science and knowledge amongst young girls for the purpose of promoting gender equality, her own writings, and her involvement in women’s rights issues established her as a notable Muslim feminist writer and social worker. Working from within the Islamic tradition, Rokeya Hossain called for social reforms for women’s emancipation, especially from practices such as purdah and the isolation that women faced in the zenana. These beliefs are most evident in her short story, “Sultana’s Dream” which we will discuss below.

“Sultana’s Dream”
This short story, originally published in 1905 (available in English translation, 1988 edition), is one of the earliest feminist utopias. In the story, which is constructed in the form of a dream, the first person narrator is seen as lounging on an easy chair when she falls asleep and is visited (most likely in her dream) by a noble lady, Sister Sara. Sister Sara invites the narrator
to take a long, pleasurable walk with her through a town where the narrator finds that all the common social norms that she associates with women have been reversed. In this idealistic setting, women run their lives and their world, and men are secluded in an ironical twist to the practice of purdah. Education, freedom and a rational use of scientific technology enable women tap solar power to establish an ecologically sound society in which they live without fear of men or criminals.

Rather than women, here the men are isolated in the mardana area. As explained by Sister Sara to the incredulous narrator, “Now that they are accustomed to the purdah system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion, we call the system mardana instead of zenana” (Hossain, 1988, p. 14). The irony of Sister Sara’s words can be lost on no reader since in a social system which normalizes veiling, it is women who tend to get ‘accustomed’ to their unnatural seclusion, and having internalized their oppression, stop complaining about it or seeing it as anything out of the ordinary. The conversation between the two main characters on this subject is very revealing:

“Where are the men”, I asked her.
“In their proper places, where they ought to be.”
“Pray let me know what you mean by ‘their proper places’.”
“Oh, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.”
“Just as we are kept in the zenana?”
“Exactly so.”
“How funny.” I burst into a laugh. Sister Sara laughed too.
(Hossain, 1988, pp. 8-9)

As you can see from the above exchange between the two female characters, Rokeya Hossain manages to successfully call into question women’s seclusion from social contact by parodying a system in which men are forced to imagine themselves as the secluded ones. Focusing on the value of “brain power” rather than “physical strength” (Hossain, 1988, p. 13), Hossain’s story reveals the author’s deep conviction in the power of intelligence and education as a way of liberating women from the physical and social seclusion they suffer in a patriarchal society. By turning the tables on men who wield power over women by locking them up behind literal and symbolic veils, the author draws our attention to the urgent necessity for women to free themselves of these shackles by taking their destinies into their own hands.
Activity:

Read some of the poems from the Pakistani collection *We Sinful Women* and the short story “*Sultana’s Dream*” by Rokeya Hossain. Try to find a poem in the collection which reflects sentiments similar to the ones articulated in the short story. Which literary form (verse or the short story) according to you is a more effective means of expressing resistance against the oppression women feel towards social customs which seclude them? Explain in your own words.

3.4 THE VEIL IN MIDDLE EASTERN & NORTH AFRICAN LIFE NARRATIVES

In the previous section, we looked at some examples of life narratives from South Asia in which the veil has played a prominent literary role. Similarly, in many countries of the Middle East, as well as in North Africa, where veiling is a common cultural and religious practice, we find that the veil appears as a powerful symbol in the works of women writers. This is especially true in life narratives which draw upon real life experiences to create literary works. Here, we will look at these issues in the context of two specific examples of literary texts from Iran and Morocco.
3.4.1 Socio Political History of Iran and Veiling

Iran is a multi-religious and multi-cultural country, although the majority of Iranian people are Muslims. Before the 1979 revolution, the veil had not been imposed throughout history in Iran by the clerical class. In the early sixteenth century, dominant interpretations of the Koran did not legislate veiling, which was practiced mostly only by the wealthy. During the second decade and a half of the twentieth century, called the post-constitutional period (1911-25), the modernizing and Westernizing nation-state was established by Reza Shah Pahlavi, replacing the Qajar dynasty. Reza Shah dreamt of a secular state, and like his contemporary Ataturk, he perceived religion as retrogressive and the ulema as obstacles to progress. Reza Shah imposed European dress on the population, opened the schools to women and permitted them to enter the work places. In 1936, Reza Shah abolished the wearing of the veil. Under Reza Shah, class attitudes to the veil reversed, with the upper class embracing Western reforms including Western dress, while the working poor saw the veil as a sign of propriety. Reza Shah’s unpopularity is strongest among the working class and the religious right, and with his abdication, most urban women begin wearing chadors again, though without face veils. After the 1979 revolution, on the contrary, the Islamic government’s political and cultural tendencies were against the West, particularly the U.S., and veiling became compulsory. Between 1979 and 1980, some women’s spontaneous demonstrations against the mandatory veil occurred.

Women Rights’ Violation in Iran

Many women human rights defenders have been arrested by the government, imprisoned, and sacked from their careers throughout the post-revolutionary period. Many Iranian women and young girls have been subjected to sexual violence, torture, and insult; and some of them have been executed and stoned to death. There are evidences and documents which prove that some young girls have been arrested for social crimes, such as inappropriate dress, and have been raped in the Islamic Republic prisons. These violations against women’s rights are legislated by the Islamic government. Since 1979 in Iran, there has been a drastic reduction in women’s personal, political, cultural, legal, and social rights. Islamic law has re-established polygamy, lowered the legal age of puberty for women to seven, reduced women’s ability to inherit or It is obvious that the veil has become one of the non-negotiable essentials governing women’s lives in the post-revolutionary Iran. However, a lot of Iranian women try to show their disobedience by putting some strands of their hair out of their scarves. Such gestures of disobedience allow Iranian women to develop their identities specifically for the reason that they are forbidden and enable them to construct their identities against the torturous rituals governing what they are forced to wear, how they are expected to act, the gestures they have to control, the daily struggle against arbitrary rules and restrictions.
In the early 1970s, at the height of Iran's drive toward 'modernization', the Cultural Council of the Ministry of Arts and Culture prepared a list of the great figures of Iranian history. Unfortunately, it contained the names of only four women. Women have always been confined to the domestic life doing stitching, embroidery, or tapestry. The pen was in the hands of men.

It was only in the year 1947 that the first collection of short stories by a woman writer appeared in Iran, *Fire Quenched* by Simin Daneshvar. Though the Islamic Republic did not lay down any rule for the portrayal of women in literature, it took a definite position in the presentation of women on screen. It said, Muslim women should be shown as chaste, and motherly, in charge of raising God-fearing and responsible children in society. Women should not be treated as a commodity or used as sexual objects. Women actors were given static roles and shown in such a way as to avoid showing their bodies. Eye contact and touching between men and women were not encouraged.

As you can see from the above, the concern for the compulsory wearing of the veil has been there in Iran for a long time. Secularized women have protested, challenged, and resisted the veil. Similarly, religiously oriented women too debated the issue from the religious standpoint. Let us now briefly examine the place of the veil in life-writings by Iranian women.

### 3.4.2 The Veil in the Writings of Iranian Women

The veil has emerged as a favorite theme of women writers in post-revolutionary literature. Inside the country, it has become the yardstick of Iranian politics and the level of tolerance of the regime. The veil has always been seen as a multilayered metaphor, accommodating itself in a puzzling diversity of ideologies. Proponents of nationalism, westernization, Islamic revivalism, feminism and other political ideologies have all found in the veil their own message and meaning. The veil is seen by some as a challenge to western domination, class privilege, sexual license, and corruption. Some women of substance like the poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh and the writer Zahra Rahnavard, along with some other educated women veiled themselves voluntarily before the revolution. If the veil appeared to some as a retrogressive step, a backward turning of the clock, or an alienated reaction against modernization, to those Western-educated writers it is a valid re-assertion of independence and indigenous values, expressing a desire to create a new social order, just and honourable.

For others though the veil is a symbol of social deprivation and oppression. Many Iranian women writers have expressed this sentiment through the form of the short story or through verse form. For instance, in a collection edited by John Green and Farsin Yazdanfar entitled *A Walnut's Sapling on...*
Masih’s Grave (1993), we find several short stories by authors such as Mahshid Amirshahi, Mihan Bahrami, Simin Daneshvar, Shahrukh Parsipu and Guli Taraqqi, which reflect this view. Similarly, in Veils and Words (1992) by Farzaneh Milani, you can read about the lives and works of well-known Iranian writers and poets such as Tahereh Qorratol’Ayn, Parvin E’tessami, Forugh Farrokhzad, Tahereh Saffarsadeh and Semeen Bebahani, all of whom have dealt with the issue of the veil in their various literary works.

In the above sections, we have examined the theme of veiling in life narratives in the context of the socio-political history of Iran. The practice of veiling is also common in some North African countries. Below, let us look take the example of a well-known woman writer from a North African country, Morocco.

**Activity:**
Find out more about any one of the Iranian women short story writers, and about any one of the Iranian poets mentioned above. Read one short story and one poem by these respective writers. Describe how the image of the veil in the works that you have read.

### 3.4.3 The Veil in Life Narratives from Morocco

In Morocco sights of women wearing long head-scarves and covered dresses is common. Many Moroccans believe that the headscarf is a political symbol and hence carries heavy meaning in the wearing or not wearing of it.

In Fatima Mernissi’s widely acclaimed book *Dreams of Trespass* (1994), the author traces the life narrative of a young girl’s life in a traditional Moroccan harem. As we follow the young girl in her day to day experiences, we notice that she is quite a curious, precocious little child who is constantly
questioning. Her mother and aunts repeatedly discourage her from asking too many questions. The frontier, literally and metaphorically, is one of the main entities that shape her life and being. The young Mernissi has an almost paradoxical relationship with the different frontiers. For her, it is both a source of happiness and a source of pain, it is mysterious to her but at the same time, she can feel how it smothers her and the other women. At the beginning, it is very obvious that she feels very overwhelmed by the frontier, as she writes, “looking for the frontier has become my life’s occupation. Anxiety eats at me whenever I cannot situate the geometric line organizing my powerlessness” (Mernissi, 1994, p. 3). The frontier is not so cut and dry and that there is an equilibrium that has lasted for generations, trying to define the frontier will make her journey of self-discovery one of tumultuous means. She writes, “Our house gate was a definite hudud, or frontier, because you needed permission to step in or out. Every move had to be justified and even getting to the gate was a procedure” (Mernissi, 1994, p. 21).

The harem was about private space and the rules regulating it. It did not need walls. Once you knew what was forbidden, you carried the harem within. Mernissi listened to a special program on Radio Cairo about Huda Sha’raoui and the progress of women’s rights in Egypt and Turkey Chama is one of the characters that are probably endowed with the most freedom. Her affinity for dramatic performances allows her to talk about the taboo of topics and is tolerated by the men of the harem.

Check Your Progress:

*Read Dreams of Trespass by Fatima Mernissi. Describe the many facets of the image of the harem as used in this novel.*
In the above we have used Morocco as just one illustrative example of a North African nation. You are encouraged to find out more about the works of other North African women writers and read these on your own. One such feminist writer whose works you may find interesting is Nawal El Saadawi, from Egypt, who has published many novels describing the struggles of Egyptian women against patriarchy (See Section 3.8 for suggested readings by this author).

### 3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have learnt how the system of the veil has come to operate in countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Iran. We have also learnt how throughout history, women in India have fought for their emancipation from the veil. We have read about writers from many different cultures, including Afghanistan and Morocco, who have raised their voices against the restrictions imposed upon their bodies through the imposition of the veil. We have discussed how in states like Iran, the veil has been a topic of debate throughout the evolving history of that nation, and how oppressive regimes like the Taliban are enforcing inhuman laws on the women of Afghanistan. Through different literary forms, such as the novel, the short story, and poetry, the women writers whose works we have discussed, have been able to critique the oppression experienced by compulsory impositions of veiling, and have been able to use the veil as a literary metaphor to draw attention to women’s experiences and struggles against their oppression.

### 3.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) a) Discuss the prevalence of the veil in ancient India.
   b) Critically analyse the metaphor of veiling in any one short story by Ismat Chughtai.

2) Read the two poems by Fahmida Riaz and Ishrat Aafreen mentioned in this Unit. Discuss how the veil is used as an important image in these poems and to what effect.

3) Read the story “Sultana’s Dream”. Do you think the feminist utopia described by Rokeya Hossain is an ideal world for women? Why or why not? Justify your response.

4) Discuss how the veil has been used as an item of political debate in Iran. How has this been taken up by Iranian women writers? Explain with the help of examples.

5) Discuss how the veil acts as a metaphor in the writings of Iranian women.

6) Discuss, with the help of example, the veil as a tool of oppression or resistance in the works of women writers from Afghanistan and Morocco.
3.7 REFERENCES


3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS


