

PURDAH

by

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in

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## ABSTRACT

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This document supports *Purdah*, an installation based thesis exhibition consisting of photography, video, text, sound and scent. *Purdah* records the diversity in the readings, meanings and interpretations of veils associated with Islam – such as burqa, niqab and hijab – while studying their gendered, historical and cultural contexts through an intersectional, feminist lens. *Purdah* consists of digital and print representations of an amalgam of ethnography, storytelling and a contemporary critical art practice. In the Introduction, I invite readers to delve into why I have chosen Islamic forms of veiling as a focus of my research while using it symbolically, conceptually and realistically in my work. The introductory chapter will lead into the Methodology chapter highlighting visual research methods employed to realize this exhibition. Following the Methodology chapter is the Literature Review in which I discuss influences of various artists and writers on my work. Finally, the paper is closed with an Epilogue.

*Keywords:* *Purdah*, Burqa, Islamic Feminism, Photography, Image, Text, Sound, Video, Installation



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Professor Fatimah Tuggar and Professor Michelle Gay, as well as faculty at OCAD University for investing their time into advising my practice, and encouraging my academic and artistic growth.

I would like to thank the participants for sharing their stories with authenticity and generosity. Their narratives and lived experiences serve as an enriching contribution to discourse on cultural practices – such as Purdah – that are often misunderstood.

I thank my parents for their unconditional support. Without them, this research would not be possible.

I thank Allah for guiding the way.

## DEDICATION

Purdah is dedicated to my parents, Begum Rubina Magsi and Nawabzada Tariq Magsi, my sisters, Fatima, Aasiya, Aruba and Anisa, and my ally, Gordan Sumanski.

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## ***Introduction***

The title of my thesis exhibition and paper is Purdah. The word is derived from the Persian language. The term is used by speakers of Urdu as well, which is my mother tongue. Purdah can also be spelt as Pardah. For the sake of consistency, I will use the following spelling Purdah throughout the paper. Purdah means to seclude oneself from others, to wear enveloping clothing, to veil, and it also means curtains. Rather than situate Purdah as an isolated cultural and religious practice, visitors to the gallery are invited to engage with the term as a concept, a state, which is complicated and conveyed through lens-based artworks. I will also be using the following types of veiling interchangeably; burqa, niqab and hijab, which are forms of the practices of Purdah.



*Left to right: Dupatta (Purdah for the hair and/or body) Hijab (Purdah for the hair), Niqab (Purdah for full face, hair and body with an opening for the eyes), Burqa (Purdah for the hair, face and body with a viewing mesh over the eyes) © Mariam Magsi 2015-2017*

My interest in Purdah was activated after a powerful visual encounter while documenting daily life scenes in Pakistan for an ongoing series of photographic investigations.



*Burqa Family. Digital Photograph. © Mariam Magsi 2014*

A family was crossing an unpaved, dirt road, on the outskirts of Karachi. The women of the family were veiled from head to toe. The only elements visible were the rhinestone-embroidered high heels grasping their feet, along with similarly embroidered burqas on their bodies. This photograph prompted a deeper need to investigate the world of cultural and religious veiling practices, even though veiling has been practiced by women around me my entire life – and I often veil with the dupatta<sup>1</sup> when in Muslim majority countries like Pakistan.

Photography is not only a primary choice of medium for me, but also serves as a practice-based research methodology. The advent of easily accessible, high-resolution digital cameras and smart phones, has made recording lived experiences easier. Unheard stories previously ignored and overlooked can now be shared with millions around the world at the click of a button.

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<sup>1</sup> A dupatta is a piece of cloth used to veil the bosom and/or hair in South Asian dressing.

<sup>2</sup> Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. London: Saqi Books, 2011.

Photography can have a democratic quality in recording histories, while also aiding the agency of empowering for both myself as a Muslim, female photographer and the diverse participants in my works.

This thesis project is an attempt to investigate and explore the politics and ongoing debates about the practice of veiling. Countries like Bulgaria and France have some veiling bans, while Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan observe state imposed veiling laws. In Pakistan and Canada there are fashion and political veiling trends.

My travel-led research in these past two years has also revealed a familial history of veiling that, until recently, I was unaware existed. Through my own family history and structures I have learnt about the power dynamics of veiling; female family members resisting males telling them not to veil. They choose to observe Purdah and function within a specific tradition of patriarchy that is not historically cultural or religious, but rather a manifestation of a set of conventions perpetuated through early Western Quranic interpretations and translations in various societies.<sup>2</sup>

While, there are no photographic records, I learnt from my mother that both my maternal great-grandmother, Karmi Shahn and maternal grandmother, Sarfraz Begum wore burqas. Karmi Shahn's choice to veil did not appear to make her weak or submissive to males. Stories are told about how she ruled over her large estate from a raised wooden pedestal in the centre of the residence. From this throne she smoked hookah on a nightly basis, slept and offered her



prayers, while managing servants and her family's day-to-day affairs. No one in her family could get married or travel outside of the vicinity of the estate without her permission.

My maternal grandfather, a soldier in the British army who because of his close ties to German and British settlers in Lahore appreciated a Western lifestyle. However, he was not able to stop Sarfraz Begum from wearing a veil. He did not appreciate her orthodox cultural and religious practices, such as veiling. He forced her to take the back seat when they drove through the streets of Lahore in his car in the 1950s, so as to not be directly associated with a woman in Purdah.

It is important to note, that not all practices of veiling are done based on male or state imposition as is widely believed. In many urban Pakistani Muslim communities, there are disagreements and intolerances about women choosing to veil. For me it is this very paradox that makes the subject all the more alluring and worthy of investigation.

In my own family, my mother as well as my sister Fatima, who observe Purdah are also my research participants. My mother faced resistance from my father when she began to dress more conservatively and shrouded her body and hair with veils. My sister, Fatima, has a reactive, on and off relationship with the veil. She gives an honest opinion of the various pressures and judgments of veiling and unveiling.

The predicament of living in a society where a woman is forced to veil, for example, in Afghanistan, is not much different than a woman being forced to remove her burqini as we saw on a French beach in 2016. In the last two years of investigating the topic of Islamic veiling through multidisciplinary mediums, a plethora of artists have emerged making work on the topic of veiling, including but not limited to Fazila Amiri, Shamsia Hassani and Rada

Akbar. I posit my body of work as an important contribution to this collective voice and awareness, a growing community comprised of artists of Muslim backgrounds. Islamic veiling is not an easy subject to criticize, problematize and investigate. Purdah is a controversial topic. It has heavy political undertones, is linked with culture, religion and identity and ‘ruffles the feathers’ of agencies of Islamic governance that continue to hold patriarchal ideologies and values. As well it can be disarming to Western patriarchies. For example, Ontario resident, Zunera Ishaq, began to observe Purdah against her family’s wishes at the age of 15. Later, she embarked on an arduous, legal battle to be able to take the Canadian citizenship oath while keeping her face veiled with a niqab. “The legal battle became an issue [...] when Conservative Leader Stephen Harper said his government, if re-elected would examine whether public servants should be forbidden from wearing the niqab.”<sup>3</sup> Against the backdrop of this complex global and political discourse, and political posturing over practices like Purdah, I believe artists, as reflective thinkers, through questioning and material research, can bring nuance and criticality to this discourse. I agree with Nina Simone’s definition of an artist’s responsibility when she says,

An artist’s duty, as far as I’m concerned, is to reflect the times. I think that is true of painters, sculptors, poets, musicians. As far as I’m concerned, it’s their choice, but I choose to reflect the times and situations in which I find myself. That, to me, is my duty. And at this crucial time in our lives, when everything is so desperate, when everyday is a matter of survival, I don’t think you can help but be involved. Young people, black and white, know this. That’s why they’re so involved in politics. We will shape and mold this country or it will not be molded and shaped at all anymore. So I

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<sup>3</sup> News, CBC. *Woman at Centre of Niqab Debate Takes Citizenship Oath*. CBCnews. October 10, 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/zunera-ishaq-niqab-ban-citizenship-oath-1.3257762>.

don't think you have a choice. How can you be an artist and not reflect the times? That to me is the definition of an artist.<sup>4</sup>

My research then asks the following questions: How do I add to artistic and academic discourse on veiling, while shifting perspectives of viewers and readers? How do I approach this project through a unique lens? Is it possible to look at the nuances of the lives of veil users without boxing them into categories of oppressed and liberated? I am fully aware that as an artist investigating a subject close to home, I bring my own set of biases to the research. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify that I am not a professional anthropologist or an ethnographer. I am an artist who records lived experiences, cultural observations, rituals, people and places, using ethnographic methods to extract characters, locations and narratives that inform my artistic undertakings, in this case Purdah.

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<sup>4</sup> Simone, Nina: *An Artist's Duty*. February, 2013.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99V0mMNf5fo>

## Chapter 1: Methodology

The Purdah exhibition has three dialogical sections. Purdah is installed in the Graduate Gallery. The Registry is in the Hallway. The Electronic Media Space (EMS) holds Burqatecture.



*Section 1: Graduate Gallery-Purdah*

*Section 2: Hallway-The Registry*

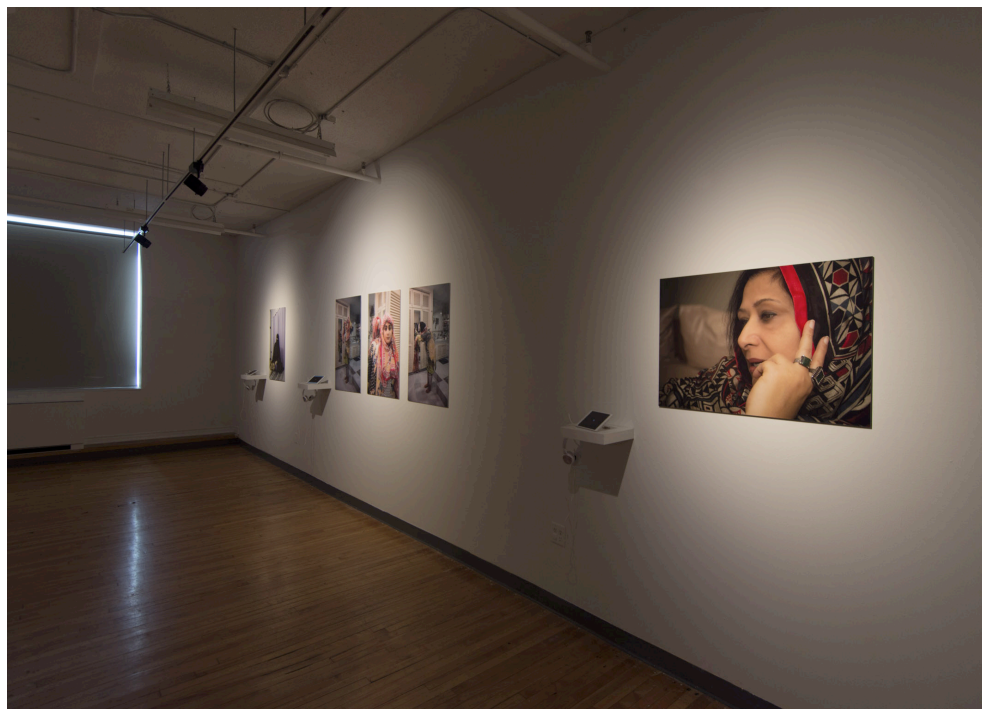
*Section 3: Electronic Media Space-Burqatecture*

### ***Purdah-Graduate Gallery***

As indicated in the map above, the Graduate Gallery holds photographs, video, text and sound. The photographs are 36 by 24 inches in size. They are mounted on gator board and installed on the walls. The portraits installed on the right wall of the gallery entrance are

accompanied by audio excerpts extracted from interviews with the participants while text excerpts of the interviews accompany the portraits on the left wall.

One may ask why some photographs are accompanied by text and others with audio clips. This simply has to do with access and permissibility. The data collected from the participants is diverse but with this comes a complex set of challenges. While many participants enjoyed the photographic collaborations, some did not permit usage of their stories. Others were receptive to sharing their stories provided their voices be altered. Participants like my mother and my sister were eager to share their experiences and opinions, permitting the use of their photographs, video and audio.



*Purdah Exhibition. Graduate Gallery. Digital Photograph. © Mariam Magsi 2017*

In this gallery space, I attempt to create tension between the still photographs and interview responses recorded as audio clips and text excerpts. The photographs are dominant elements of the exhibition. The audio and text are secondary focal points holding multiple meanings and messages that are harder to denote in the images alone. Visitors to *Purdah* are

invited to encounter the photographs and the narratives contained within them through a diverse range of methods. Installing the photographs with audio and textual interviews in this way provides multiple access points for viewers into the exhibition, especially those that are at a cultural disconnect from the subject of Purdah.

The participants I record are collaborators on artworks and their narratives further inform my conceptual undertakings. Sometimes we meet and shoot once, while other participants have lent themselves to this series multiple times. Many participants have now become friends and are following the journey of the Purdah project as it unfolds from their respective countries. I believe the stories are rich and complex enough to engage the viewer with multiple interpretations and readings of Purdah.



*Purdah Exhibition. Graduate Gallery. Digital Photograph. © Eric Chengyang 2017*

When you walk into the Graduate Gallery you will be faced with an amalgam; on the right, there is an installation of photography and audio, on the left photography and text. On the far-left corner, there is a digital projection on loop depicting cultural and participant observation. The photographs are sized in a way that they may resemble windows, offering visitors a view into another world; while also metaphorically acting as mirrors, reflecting back at the on lookers. Viewers are faced with, what Juliet Byington describes in *Orientalism – Introduction to Nineteenth Century Literary Criticism*, as the ultimate other. “The veiled Muslim woman symbolizes the ultimate Other who can also reveal much about the individual confronting her as well as about Western patriarchy.”<sup>5</sup> I propose the veiled Muslim ‘other’ becomes a mirror reflecting back to the viewer while simultaneously acting as an index or window to another world. A world into which the viewer may attempt to look into but due to cultural limitations and differences, ultimately lacks access to. The images of the veiled participants, function as a reminder of the divisions that separate us, while the narratives of these participants, I would suggest, may project hopeful commonalities. The intimacy and richness of these narratives offer insight into the particularities of the participant’s lives.

### ***The Registry-Hallway***

In the hallway, there is a large 10 x 4 feet vinyl photo installation that presents multiple studio style portraits of Purdah using individuals of varying heights and backgrounds in a variety of colourful burqas. Opposite the portraits is a mirror of the same size as the vinyl. This piece called “The Registry” is a protest piece in direct response to U.S President Donald Trump’s proposal to create a registry that tracks Muslims. The portraits are glossy, bright and colourful. Categorized neatly, the photographs compartmentalize the bodies of the Purdah

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<sup>5</sup> Byington, Juliet. *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*. Hardcover ed. Vol. 97. Gale. 2001.



observers. The variety, colour, and humour in the concept brings forth the idiocy and improbability of President Donald Trump's proposal; the tracking of every living American Muslim and enforcing strict screening methods on Muslim bodies, especially those that observe Purdah. The visitors will be reflected in the mirror as participants, while faced with the colourful multiplicities of Purdah users. There is a queer, Muslim male concealed in one of the burqas. Two Muslim women, one of whom chooses to veil her hair, are also concealed in the burqas. I too, am concealed in a burqa in one of the images. The participant is mirrored in the installation, adding yet another layer of critical self-reflection to this echoing visual. The hallway passage as interstitial, functions as a reminder of this political and physical reality.

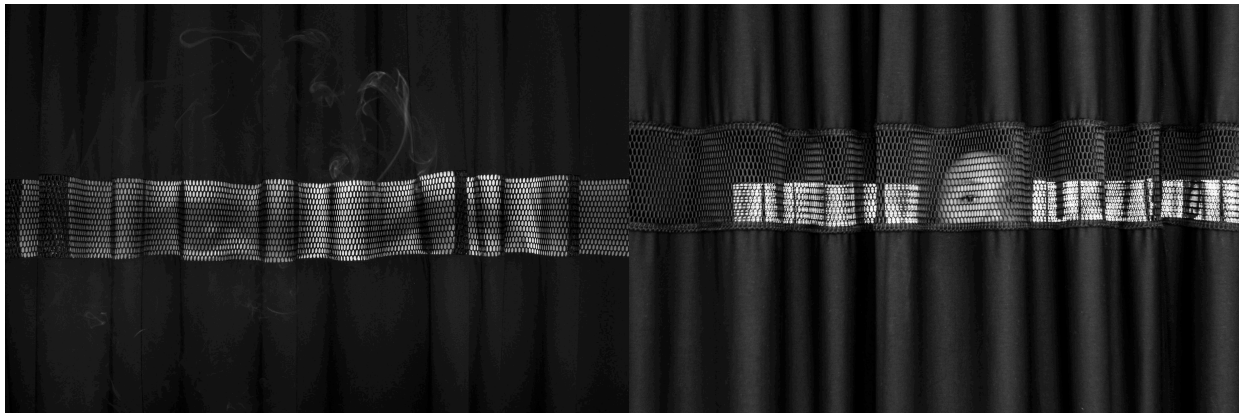


*The Registry. Hallway. Digital Photograph. © Mariam Magsi 2017*

### ***Burqatecture-Electronic Media Space (EMS)***

During brainstorming sessions focusing on the intersections of Purdah with architecture, my thesis advisor, Professor Michelle Gay came up with a unique, playful term, *Burqatecture*. *Burqatecture* is inspired by Purdah intersecting with architecture, as indicated in the image above and is installed in the Electronic Media Space (EMS). The EMS space is partitioned by using a

black curtain or Purdah that goes around from the entrance, pinned along the wall and ends at the entrance again; creating a black cube. Running along this black cube is a meshed viewing band that is approximately 6 inches high and 5 feet above the ground. Visitors can choose either side of the Purdah to view a projection through the mesh. Both projections provide audio and visual experiences, among which the viewer can freely switch back and forth. Because the space is veiled all around, warmer temperatures are created, re-enacting a conceptual experience of the body being veiled in Purdah.



*Burqatecture. Electronic Media Space. Digital Photograph. © Eric Chengyang 2017*

The projections to the right and left of the entrance play looped videos of a set of eyes staring back at the viewer. When confronted with this large, penetrating gaze, it is unclear whether the viewer or the projection is veiled or viewed. Visitors to the gallery stand in the veiled space protected from the world and events outside of the veiled space. This grants a sense of safety and seclusion. The visitors become participants in the immersive installation once choosing to step inside the veiled space. The act of entering this space reflects the liberty to choose to enter a veiled space, much like choosing to veil. Tension is created when the line blurs between who is encapsulated in the veil; the participant or the entity that belongs to the set of eyes. When the viewer turns from one set of eyes to the other, the eyes continue to quietly surveil. There are quiet, ambient whispers of participants uttering the word *Purdah* in this space. These echoes reassert and reclaim the space for *Burqitecture*.

During my travels, I came to the realization that there were similarities between veiled architectural spaces and the veiled gaze behind *Purdah*. On a trip to a shrine in Pakistan, I documented the partition that separates the graves of the saints from the many veiled and unveiled sinners and patrons in the shrines.<sup>6</sup> This metallic partition bears resemblance to the mesh pattern that goes across the eyes on a burqa. This similarity was especially visible, when I took a camera and placed it behind the mesh of the burqa. Studying the visual aesthetics of the world, through a fragmented lens provided a completely new way of seeing my surroundings. The images below provide a better understanding of my creative engagement with *Purdah*.

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<sup>6</sup> *Of Saints and Sinners*. The Economist. December 20, 2008.  
<http://www.economist.com/node/12792544>.



Left: Patron praying at Tajuddin shrine, Pakistan. Digital Photograph. © Mariam Magsi 2016

Right: Viewing a participant through the mesh of the burqa. Digital Photograph. © Mariam Magsi 2016

Hanna Papanek, in a section of her writings in Lila Abu-Lughod's book *Do Muslim*

*Women Need Saving?* refers to the burqa as a portable seclusion.

She notes that many saw it as a liberating invention because it enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men.<sup>7</sup>

Burqatecture became an opportunity to engage with this idea of the portable seclusion. Working together with Camal Pirbhai, a Swiss Canadian soft furnishings designer, we studied meshes on burqas. We investigated fabrics that emulated the mesh of the burqa and explored a myriad of textiles that would suit the physicality of the portable seclusion. Being sensitive to textile and draping we tested several materials including linen, georgette, velvet, and cotton before finally settling on black cotton sateen with a heavy fall. This particular fabric, I found, drapes like Purdah, a burqa, apt as a portable seclusion. The mesh we opted for has larger holes, than the mesh of a typical burqa. Keeping in mind the size of Burqatecture, I scaled up the viewing mesh.

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<sup>7</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. 36

### *Travel/Ethnography*

I started my research by visiting the Thorncliffe Park Drive area in Toronto. There is one particular lively corner in this neighbourhood that contains a mosque directly adjacent to Iqbals, an ethnic, South Asian restaurant in Toronto. Next to it there is a large wholesale grocery store also named Iqbals. Tucked between the two is a store that sells colourful hijabs, niqabs and Islamic dresses. The area is home to large groups of visible minorities and seeing Purdah observing Muslims, who are covered from head to toe is as common a sight in this neighbourhood as it is on the streets of Pakistan.



*Muslim fashion stores, Thorncliffe Park, Ontario. Digital Photograph. © Mariam Magsi 2016*

Visiting this neighbourhood on numerous occasions allowed me to become acquainted with the business owners and other patrons – in essence gaining their trust. Eventually my research tools would emerge (my camera and notebook) so I could record material that I was observing around me. One of the first aspects noted at Iqbals, the restaurant, was that there were cube shaped rooms enclosed behind curtains, for single women that were already veiled and Purdah observing families.



*Cube shaped spaces at Iqbals restaurant in Toronto for Purdah observing families and single women. The purdah is drawn to ensure privacy while dining.*

*Digital Photograph  
© Mariam Magsi 2016*

When I showed this image to fellow liberal Muslims, many of them critiqued the idea of having gendered spaces in a western country like Canada. Some even went as far as accusing orthodox Muslims of destroying Canadian values of liberty and freedom. I was appalled. These findings drove some of my research questions to ask: If members of our own community were showing such hostility and lack of acceptance toward Purdah then what expectations could one have of members outside our community? As a practice-based researcher, the interactions around these contested veiled spaces led me to explore positioning the gallery as a similarly contested space – creating Burqitecture, a space that could contain viewers as reflective participants.

I traveled to seek out and engage with Purdah users in Canada, Dubai, Morocco and Pakistan. As a Pakistani/Canadian citizen, I found myself having more access to people in Pakistan due to common aspects such as language and cultural similarities. The Canadian Purdah users that responded to my online advertisements were willing to share interviews via email, but did not want to meet in person, or have their voices recorded or photographs taken. Whether wearing various Islamic veils, or my offers of complete anonymity through technical means, they chose not to participate as documented subjects. This was an intriguing finding in my research. I had presumed that Purdah observers in the West would feel at ease with the camera, but the exact opposite happened. Even on my ethnographic trips to Thorncliffe Park and



Regent Park in the Greater Toronto Area, many Purdah observers would stop and chat with me at grocery stores, in parks and in other public spaces, but majority did not want to be recorded and photographed. The participants' refusal to go on record is evidence of both their agency and valid concerns of negative judgment in the current climate of anti-Muslim bigotry in the West. In comparison, I found participants in countries outside of Canada were far more enthusiastic to go on record.

Traveling outside of Canada to meet with people, observe their environments, spend time in the intimacy of their places of work and leisure led to creating alliances. I engaged with Purdah users from all walks of life, intersecting with gender, class and race, navigating their lives with Purdah in both orthodox and contemporary ways. When I began to put the photographs together after my travels, I realized these human narratives were layered with contradiction and complexity. My travels led me to Pakistan, a country usually stigmatized and misrepresented by Western media; and Morocco, a North African country that has been fetishized in Western art. Painters like Eugène Delacroix (1800-1874) were infamous for “portraying Orientalist subjects and his fascination with the Near East can be seen in many of his artworks, including *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1826) and *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1834).”<sup>8</sup>

Ethnographic-style methods are often criticized for being ridden with biases. Irrespective of this, I continue to employ ethnographic research methods. This constant engagement with new people and places keeps me alert and outside of my comfort zone at all times, immersed in cultural and participant observation. While traditionally ethnographers take field notes through writing, I employ the practice of taking a vast variety and diversity of photographs and videos.

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<sup>8</sup> DeVito, Elizabeth J. *Orientalism and the Photographs of Eugène Delacroix: An Exploration of Vision, Identity, and Difference in Nineteenth Century France*. School of Art and the College of Fine Arts, 2011: 11



In BBC's "Ethnography-What is it and why do we need it?" Dr. Ruben Andersson clarifies that Ethnography is not meant to be perceived as journalistic exposé or fact.

Rather than dig for killer facts, good ethnographers aim to uncover something deeper about how society or subculture works- and it does so by changing perspective to that of the insider. We have to suspend disbelief and shift our gaze [...] This understanding cannot come about through a social survey or a piece of investigative reporting alone. We have to stick around and listen, observe and participate, one awkward step at a time. It may be messy and imperfect, yet it opens up worlds that will otherwise remain locked to outsiders.<sup>9</sup>

I use Ethnography with complete awareness that I am recording the lived experiences of Purdah users from my own chosen angles, perspectives and positions. The consent and release forms signed by all participants detail the nature of my Purdah project making them aware that their interviews will be transcribed, edited, paraphrased and translated, and that their photos and videos will be used, edited, cropped and altered via technical means.

I see the research methods for these interdisciplinary practices stemming from the photographic documentation of spaces and people. Leslye Davis's interview in *Photojournalism's Uncertain Future? She begs to Differ* responds positively to a rising inclusivity in the industry as well as the 'digitization' of the photographic genre as important aspects that can be read through an intersectional feminist lens and less dominated by the skewed perspectives of a handful of privileged white men. She does not lament over the nostalgic past of the film and analogue days – the days when this industry was not easily accessible if you were female, a minority or foreign.

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<sup>9</sup>BBC Radio 4 - *Thinking Allowed - Ethnography – What Is It and Why Do We Need It?* BBC News.  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/16mlCRBLD67XtL4hlMMHdF7/ethnography-what-is-it-and-why-do-we-need-it>.

When I was in photojournalism school I had an identity crisis because almost every photographer I admired or we talked about in class was a white man with a head of white hair and a great big beard. Occasionally there was a Caroline Cole or Barbara Davidson but typically women we discussed covered conflicts. It seemed the only way to carve out a path for yourself, as a woman in this field, was to go out into the war zones as if to say, 'I can do anything a man can do.' But you should be able to be a woman in photojournalism and tell stories from your unique perspective. You should be published, and you should also be able to do that if you're black and you live in sub-Saharan Africa. Or if you're Indian, or if you're Japanese— your unique perspective is valuable, and it's to the benefit of us all that it be shared.<sup>10</sup>

For me the appeal of Digital Photography is its ability to be shared and distributed on multiple online and print mediums. I have created a blog documenting my research over the last two years on the practice of Purdah.<sup>11</sup> The blog consists of photographs, videos, sound pieces as well as participant and cultural observations. The public following of the blog has been growing steadily. In the current political climate of anti-Muslim bigotry, I think it is now more important than ever to bridge gaps between opposing views on Purdah. This living archive problematizes the complexities of Purdah practices while humanizing and politicizing the veiled bodies we consume through an Orientalist<sup>12</sup> lens. Photography and video serve as powerful recording tools of expression, to raise awareness, shift perspective and garner attention toward these diverse voices. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the practice of Purdah is not the issue I am

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<sup>10</sup> Estrin, J. *Photojournalism's Uncertain Future? She Begs to Differ*. 2017. Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/2m7GOA2>

<sup>11</sup> *Purdah*. Retrieved from <http://purdahocad.tumblr.com>

<sup>12</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

exploring or debating in this topic. My question is whether we, as viewers can humanize the participants we are viewing, without victimizing or glorifying them.

A study of my photographic methods show that I have a lot more creative freedom when shooting in a studio situation compared to in the field. When I am in the homes of the participants, it is harder to predict lighting conditions, availability of props and objects and time constraints. The participants have family obligations, they may not want their families to know about their interviews and photo shoots, or they may not have too much time to spare. Not wanting to be in their way for too long, I try to keep my interviews and photoshoots concise, respectful and discreet while capturing the conversations and visuals sensitively, staying alert for captivating moments, occurrences and disruptions. When the participants are in my studio, where I have lighting kits, reflectors, floor to ceiling windows with ample sunlight, props and various other materials, it is easier to explore and collaborate with creative freedom.

### ***Research Findings***

This artwork seeks to tackle patriarchies, hegemonic structures and power dynamics by recording and studying the lived experiences of Purdah users. I examine three photographs and interviews here as samples of my research findings. Some subjects have been anonymized, except those who have granted permission to have their identities revealed.



*"I've liked boys since I was 5. My mother found a letter I wrote to a male crush in my school bag. She beat the shit out of me. We never spoke about it again. Sometimes I feel like I am living in a bubble that will pop any second. They will never, ever accept this side of me, so there is no point in putting up a fight with them. I'm going to marry a girl eventually and have children. I can't carry on this lifestyle forever. Let's face it. It's not Islamic. I'll change after marriage."*

*Participant 1: Anonymous. Burqa Bubble.  
Interviewed in Toronto, Canada. 2016. 5 hours.  
Photographs, video and audio tape interviews.*

Participant 1, agreed to exhibition of the photographs made during this encounter, but withheld permission to share videos. The participant gave me permission to use his audio under the condition that it would be digitally altered so as to avoid recognition. I met this participant at a social setting some years back, where he had come out to me as a homosexual, Muslim man. When he learnt about Purdah, my project, he contacted me on a visit to Toronto and came to my studio. The participant lives in the Middle East (prefers country of origin not to be identified). His sexual orientation is criminalized there. He enjoys Canadian citizenship but chooses to live in a society where he can exert and benefit from male privileges that he believes would not be granted in North America. For example, the subject plans on getting married to a woman chosen by his mother, who will care for his domestic life and bear him children. Of course, this is not to say that male privilege is absent in North American society, but rather that the participant has access to other kinds of male privileges he prefers to leverage in the Middle East.

Amidst our conversations he mentions the precarity of his life being like a bubble on the verge of bursting. The Purdah he wears when traveling ensures safety, security and anonymity but is also vulnerable, much like a bubble. Incorporating the subject's metaphorical bubble conceptually into my images is a way of sharing his story and to exploring and expanding the resonance and meanings of Purdah.



*"You know the other day I was out shopping with my husband and we decided to stop at food street to grab a quick bite. An elderly man in western attire, sporting a cane walked up to my husband, pointed the cane at me and said-:*

*"If you want to keep her covered up like that, then keep her at home! Why have you brought her outdoors at all if you're going to dress her this way?"*

*Can you believe that? The nerve! I glared at him, stepped in front of my husband and snapped back-:*

*"You want to talk about my purdah, you address me directly. You don't need to ask my husband this question. If I had a problem wearing this veil outdoors, then I would have stayed at home. I am perfectly happy and comfortable!"*

*The man was so ashamed of himself and rightfully so."*

*Participant 2: Humna. Interviewed in Pakistan. 2017. 2 hours. Photographs, video and audio tape interviews.*

Participant 2's interview explores how the veiled 'other' is not only at odds with western intolerance but is also battling homegrown intolerance to Purdah. While out with her husband,

Participant 2 finds herself in a confrontation with a man who disapproves of her Purdah. The irony and complexity lies in the fact that the man is Pakistani, in a Muslim country calling out fellow citizens for their chosen brand of Islam. He is participating in the inherent patriarchal structures he is bound by, especially by not referring to Participant 2 directly, taking away her agency and addressing her husband instead. Participant 2 breaks the presumptuous codes of subservience by jumping in before her husband can defend her, in order to stand up to the man herself. In the photograph Participant 2 is sitting on her chair, in a bedroom painted purple, a colour she boastfully describes as royal.<sup>13</sup> Her posture is straight, her demeanor is calm and my choice of camera angle magnifies and elevates her physique.



*"I am in my 2nd year of medical school in Pakistan. I fought my family for higher education, because I want to become a doctor and open my own clinic one day. I met them halfway. By promising to remain in Purdah, veiled from my male colleagues and professors at the university, I have been given the freedom to obtain this education and pursue my passion for medicine and science. Many extended members of my family taunted my father and ridiculed him for allowing me to attend a co-education university. Initially, it really got to him, but now, I think he is proud of me.*

*I don't feel uncomfortable at all. In fact, I feel even more comfortable in this niqab. I am not a distraction for my male colleagues and this garment reminds me of the respect and honour of my father that I must uphold at all costs. I don't really understand why we are considered oppressed in the West. I mean, if I really wanted to, I could take this off within my university walls. Who would ever find out? Nobody. But I keep it on, because this is my honour. This is my purdah."*

*Participant 3: Hafsa. Interviewed in Pakistan. 2017. 1 hour. Photographs, video and audio.*

<sup>13</sup> Melina, Remy. *Why Is the Color Purple Associated With Royalty?* LiveScience. <http://www.livescience.com/33324-purple-royal-color.html>. 2011

Participant 3's interview explores intersectional feminism examining a crossing between gender, class and religion as shaped by familial/societal expectations. Lila Abu-Lughod in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* writes,

Because of the terms in which Muslim women's lives are represented and debated in the West, no book about women in the Muslim world can avoid confronting the question of how to think about choice and what it means to assert freedom as the ultimate value. I return again and again to these issues that lie at the heart of the nature of the matter. Born into families, we all find ourselves in particular social worlds. We are placed in certain social classes and communities in specific countries at distinct historical moments. Our desires are forged in these conditions and our choices are limited by them.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of Participant 3, she battles and overcomes structures of patriarchy, such as upholding gender honour codes of body modesty, in order to pursue higher education, in medicine, a male dominated field in Pakistan. The participant innocently questions why those viewing her outside of her culture deem her to be oppressed and voiceless when she could just as easily remove her *Purdah* when out of the sight of her family, yet prefers to keep it on. These accounts of intersectional feminism are important to record even when they lack alignment with western feminism.

In the majority of these images, the participants confront the viewer with their gaze. As a viewer, whether a liberal Muslim, an orthodox Muslim or as someone completely outside of the culture, whatever biases, prejudices and close mindedness you may carry. It is reflected back at you as you make assumptions about the subject in the photograph. French philosopher Jaques Lacan discusses "the gaze" in *Four Fundamental Concepts*,

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<sup>14</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. 18



Lacan provides a highly complex and nuanced account of this split, calling the two modes of looking the eye and the gaze. The eye is straightforward. This is the rational, conscious way of looking that most historical art methods assume. But something else happens when we look: we are also looked at (if not actually then potentially). Being a subject who looks in and at the world means that one is also an object that someone else scrutinizes. The gaze is the term Lacan uses for this strange sense of the world looking back at us. Now, this gaze is not literally someone else looking back at us, but rather 'imagined by me in the field of the other.'<sup>15</sup>

One of the most crucial steps in my post-production workflow is to bring out the eyes with the sharpening tool. The viewer's first meeting with the participant in the artwork is through the eyes and it is important to have the gaze be as clear as possible. Even if the eyes are veiled with the mesh of the burqa, I sharpen the fibers and the eyes behind the fibers so as to bring focus and attention to the area of greeting. I deliberately, strategically and critically employ this method to lock the viewer's gaze directly with the gaze of the subject.

The multiple ways in which viewers can engage with *Purdah* in this thesis exhibition is a reflection of the diversity of the participants and their stories. These installations are varied and invite viewers to enter *Purdah* through a number of audio, visual and immersive access points. There is an ethnographic methodological framework that supports conceptual undertakings of *Purdah*. As is evident in the research findings. I have carefully attempted deconstruction of *Purdah* through interdisciplinary engagement. As visitors navigate their bodies between the three spaces; the Graduate Gallery, the Hallway and the Electronic Media Space they encounter a diverse range of readings, meanings and interpretations of *Purdah* through a postcolonial, feminist lens.

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<sup>15</sup> Hatt, M., & Klonk, C. *Art history a critical introduction to its methods*. Manchester. Manchester Univ. Press. 2013

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### *Historical and Social Context of Purdah*

This chapter delves into a historical and social discussion of the practice of Purdah. Before moving onto an engagement with the work of other artists that have contributed to the discourse on cultural and religious practices such as the observation of Purdah and how they have influenced my thesis.

In *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam*, Iranian-American professor, Reza Aslan, disputes the practice of veiling as having any roots in the Islamic tradition at all. Aslan insists that to remain secluded and veiled one would have had to belong to privilege and wealth because working class women had physically laborious lives and could not afford to observe Purdah and remain at home. Moreover, Aslan's investigations lead readers to another finding, that most orthodox schools of Islamic thought will not allow discussion of and that is, that the practice of veiling was ordained to Prophet Muhammad's wives and them alone. Aslan challenges traditional, patriarchal, Islamic councils in countries like Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, that see veiling of the female body as compulsory, by engaging with the idea, that veiling as a practice, was not adopted by the Arabs, until generations after Prophet Muhammad's death.

It is difficult to say with certainty when the veil was adopted by the rest of the Ummah, though it was most likely long after Muhammad's death. Muslim women probably began wearing the veil as a way to emulate the Prophet's wives, who were revered as "the Mothers of the Ummah." But the veil was neither compulsory nor, for that matter, widely adopted until generations after Muhammad's death, when a large body of male scriptural and legal scholars began using their religious and political authority to regain the dominance they had lost in society as a result of the

Prophet's egalitarian reforms.<sup>16</sup>

Today, Purdah has become “the very essence of Muslim identity”<sup>17</sup> even though scholars keep pointing to the roots of veiling as having no origin in Islam. There is danger in dabbling in critique of gendered orthodox Islamic opinion and tradition. A recent example of this is the detainment of Dr. Homa Hoodfar on a travel-led research visit to her homeland, Iran. Despite mental health issues, academic fame and a solid reputation in Canadian academia, Iranian authorities mistreated Dr. Hoodfar, withholding her medication, and punishing her for “dabbling in feminism and security matters.”<sup>18</sup> In *The Veil in Their Minds and On Our Heads*, Dr. Hoodfar, speaks from a well researched position, on the origins of the veil,

The practice of veiling and seclusion of women is pre-Islamic and originates in non-Arab Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies. The first reference to veiling is in an Assyrian legal text which dates from the thirteenth century BC, which restricted the practice to respectable women and forbade prostitutes from veiling. Historically veiling, especially when accompanied by seclusion, was a sign of status and was practiced by the elite in the ancient Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian and Byzantine empires. Muslims adopted the veil and seclusion from conquered peoples, and today it is widely recognized by Muslims and non-Muslims, as an Islamic phenomenon that is presumably sanctioned by the Quran. At the heart of Quranic positions on the question of the veil is the interpretation of two verses (Surah al-Nur, verses 30-31) which recommend that women cover their bosoms and jewelry.

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<sup>16</sup> Aslan, Reza. *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Mernissi, Fatima. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Addison-Wesley Pub, 1991.

<sup>18</sup> *Professor Jailed in Iran for 'Dabbling in Feminism' Returns Home*. Vice. [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/canadian-prof-who-was-jailed-in-iran-for-dabbling-in-feminism-returns-home](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/canadian-prof-who-was-jailed-in-iran-for-dabbling-in-feminism-returns-home).

This has come to mean that women should cover themselves. Another verse recommends to the wives of Prophet Muhammad to wrap their cloaks tightly around their bodies, so as to be recognized and not be bothered or molested in public (Surah al-Ahzab, verse 59).<sup>19</sup>

Critique of ideological frameworks, whether related to religion, culture and/or society are necessary if a community is to evolve and progress with the times. This is one area where research is difficult, because mainstream Islamic ideology is backed by powerful patriarchal Islamic councils, that are not open to critique and dialogue. Thankfully, Dr. Hoodfar's story has a happy ending; she was able to return to Canada from Iran. In my own experience, many participants have chosen to withhold or alter their names. I continue to investigate the topic, aware of what my limitations are. When asked why I choose to investigate a topic that has many risks associated with it, the answer is quite simple. This project serves to not only critique structures of patriarchy that the veil users find themselves in, in relationship to their birthplaces, adopted countries and families. The project also performs a comparative analysis of the way Purdah users are stigmatized in the west. The hypocrisy of the west is revealed when faced with a veiled, Muslim woman: the most visible, politicized and marginalized 'other' that exists. The veiled Muslim woman also faces persecution from liberal Muslims, patriarchal structures and western hegemony and feminism that label the practice of veiling as oppressive and outdated.

### ***Artistic Practices***

There are two artists that continue to dominate the discourse on veiling, Shirin Neshat and Lalla Essaydi. Shirin Neshat is a multidisciplinary Iranian-American artist based in the

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<sup>19</sup> Hoodfar, Homa. *The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women*. Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader. 2001: 420-46.

United States. Neshat is notorious for a series of high-contrast, provocative photographs entitled *Women of Allah*, as well as, several other projects such as, *Turbulent* in which, viewers are invited to stand between two projections that address each other from opposite walls.<sup>20</sup> Neshat has been successful in combining various mediums together, such as text and photography. She pays attention to immersive installation methods. Neshat's transformation and evolution as an artist is visible through the progression of her work.<sup>21</sup> In *Women of Allah*, she is angry at the suppression of her gender in her country of birth, Iran, and depicts various conflicting social aspects of Iranian society, such as violence, women's oppression and poetry, in a self-representational, autobiographical method. Though, the images are poetic, gripping and dramatic, they have been criticized for further stereotyping Muslim women of the Middle East. By using elements like a gun, black veils and poetic calligraphy that is often interpreted as Quranic text, but is not. The text is Iranian feminist poetry written in Arabic characters. Neshat "creates for the audience a simultaneously ambiguous and presupposed atmosphere."<sup>22</sup> Later, in her installations, Neshat's role as an artist matures and she speaks to the position of being divided between two worlds, her "diasporic identity" torn between "heritage and aspiration."<sup>23</sup> As a Pakistani-Canadian artist navigating two worlds simultaneously, I understand and relate to Neshat's position.

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<sup>20</sup> Macdonald, Scott, and Shirin Neshat. *Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat*. *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 3. 2004: 620

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 625

<sup>22</sup> Khosravi, Mojgan. *Shirin Neshat: A Contemporary Orientalist*. Georgia State University. 2011: 1

<sup>23</sup> Macdonald, Scott, and Shirin Neshat. *Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat*. *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 3. 2004: 625

Even though Neshat is internationally hailed as a photographer, in an interview with writer Shadi Sheybani, she is honest about her inability to use a camera. In comparison, I prefer to exercise full control over the camera. The process of framing and composing using lens based equipment and post-production is fulfilling for me. However, the content is collaborative and an effort between myself, the camera and the participants involved. While Neshat often depicts herself in her work, or uses representations of Iranian men and women, I am more interested in actively engaging Purdah users and their narratives. My intention is to move beyond heavy reliance on the inability of the viewer to fully comprehend certain aspects of Islamic imagery. Neshat's images, specifically in the *Women of Allah* series, do not leave space for a broader dialogue. The sensationalism of props such as the gun creates a false binary, that propels the conversation in an offensive or defensive direction. Both directions, further stereotype the already politicized Muslim body. My aim is to borrow the visual vocabulary of Neshat's compelling images and films. My content differs in that I record the lived experiences of Purdah users themselves.

Lalla Essaydi's work has informed my practice and way of thinking about art making. Essaydi is also a diaspora artist of Moroccan origin, now based in the U.S. She has access to large, uninhabited homes in Morocco, where she sets up her subjects in white cotton veils and uses henna stains to mark the subjects' bodies with calligraphy: a form of Islamic art that is generally inaccessible to women.<sup>24</sup> In my lived experience, Islamic calligraphy is not limited to males. Essaydi's work creates transgressions and subversions by bringing together two art forms; male dominated Islamic calligraphy, and henna, a medium predominantly employed by women.

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<sup>24</sup> Brielmaier, Isolde. *Re-inventing the Spaces Within: The Images of Lalla Essaydi*. Aperture Foundation INC, 2005, 24.

Her subjects are concealed but confront the viewer with frontal poses and unveiled eyes. Though, many of my subjects are concealed with veils, their portraits take up a tremendous amount of space in the photographs, essentially dominating the frame. Through unveiled eyes, much like Essaydi's subjects in her photographic series, the participants in *Purdah*, look right at the viewer, unapologetically. Both Essaydi and I use text in our work, albeit through different methodological approaches. In *Re-inventing the Spaces Within: The Images of Lalla Essaydi*, Isolde Brielmaier writes about the importance of Essaydi's reconsiderations and reclamations of what it means to be an Arab woman. Especially during a time when anti-Muslim bigotry is on the rise, and identity markers such as veils are confronted with intolerance and in some cases, even violence at the hands of bigots.

She rejects a simplistic reading of Islamic culture. Islam, as depicted in her work, is both confining and liberating, fluid and rigid. It is, in essence, indefinable. Essaydi challenges not only our perceptions of Muslim societies, but also our expectations of a photographer in this world. What are we expecting to see when we look at a picture of veiled Muslim women? What "truths" do photographs really hold, and whose stories do they tell?<sup>25</sup>

The scenes constructed in Essaydi's images, are extensions of her imagination coloured by the politicization and orientalism of the veiled individual. While, re-imagining the possibilities of the harem. Even though the spaces portrayed in Essaydi's images are constricted, the images are dominated with the presence of collective, veiled women. The subjects are family members and acquaintances fully aware of the intentionality of the artist. By using a medium that posits the ability to convey truth and authenticity, Essaydi ironically transports the viewer into an artificial, constructed, staged world. Some of the participants in my photographs are

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 24

known to me, like my mother and sister, though many of their anecdotes, feelings and perceptions regarding veiling and navigating the world as South Asian, Pakistani, Muslim women that wear identity markers, are new to me. Participants like Humna, who wears a niqab in her daily life, reached out to me wanting to be a part of the project after coming across some of my blog posts online. Other participants, like Anonymous for instance, who is a queer Muslim navigating space within a literal and metaphorical veil, has become a life-long friend after partaking in the project, spending time in my studio and opening up to me. By using individuals engaging with veiling, and by using methods of documentary photography, ethnography and journalism, while translating and transcribing interviews, am I depicting the truth? Sure, one portion of it. As theorist Susan Sontag says in *On Photography* “Photographic images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it.”<sup>26</sup> In no way do my works represent the global Muslim community of veil users. Though, the diversity in class, gender, sexual orientation and race are evident in the body of work. It is not possible nor is it my responsibility as an artist, to represent the totality of the Muslim observers of Purdah. To claim to do so would be a misuse of privilege on my part, feeding into the already problematic lump summing of all Muslim bodies into a singular, narrow category. In *Converging Territories*, a compilation of photography and text by Essaydi, the artist clarifies her position as the maker of the visually stunning photographs discussed earlier, stating the following

It is obvious that while my photographs are expressions of my personal history, they can also be taken as reflections on the life of Arab women in general. There are continuities, of course, between Arab cultures, but I am uncomfortable thinking of myself as a representative of all Arab women. Art can only come from the heart of an individual artist, and I am much too aware of the range

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<sup>26</sup> Sontag, Susan. *Susan Sontag on Photography*. New York, USA: Picador, 1977, 4.



of traditions and laws amongst different Arab nations to presume to speak for everyone.<sup>27</sup>

While, I continue to remain informed and updated when it pertains to the evolving work of Shirin Neshat and Lalla Essaydi, and traces of their methodologies are evident in my own artistic journey in *Purdah*, I remain reluctant to write or directly project on the bodies of the participants in the photographs. This is because I see the act of mark making on a body as territorializing. The participants in my work have lent themselves with such generosity of spirit, in some cases risking the wrath of their family members and societies. Thus to further project, onto their narratives would be a disservice to their stories.

I am focused on unveiling the untold stories of people whose voices are unlikely to be given a media platform, unless they are politicized or shown through the lens of oppression or victimhood. As *Purdah* users intersect and navigate modern day life, they have generously stopped during fleeting moments to share their stories, through my artistic interpretation, with a public that they predominantly remain veiled from. This act of revealing, while remaining concealed, is evident in the works of both Neshat and especially Essaydi. This poetic paradox is the essence of my investigations of *Purdah*.

This brings me to the inspiration for my *Purdah* blog.<sup>28</sup> Khaula Jamil and the organization *The Citizens Archive of Pakistan*<sup>29</sup> are behind the project, *Humans of Karachi*.<sup>30</sup> The blog

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<sup>27</sup> Carlson, Amanda, Lalla Essaydi: *Converging Territories*, Power House Books, New York, NY. 2005: 26

<sup>28</sup> *Purdah*. [purdahocad.tumblr.com](http://purdahocad.tumblr.com)

<sup>29</sup> *Citizens Archive*. <http://www.citizensarchive.org>

follows a simple, yet effective format: images of diverse Pakistanis accompanied by transcribed interviews below their portraits. The accessible format of *Humans of Karachi* resonates with me, because it has a wider reach than the traditional white cube of the art gallery space. Over time, Jamil has garnered a public following that is 150,000 strong and growing. The *Purdah* blog has also seen a steady growing of followers and makes it easier to share the narratives and artwork with a global public beyond the art world and academia. There is also something utterly brave about a young, female photographer traveling through various parts of Karachi, a city where violence and sexual assault are not uncommon. Photojournalism in Pakistan continues to be dominated by men. Jamil is breaking boundaries by staying committed to the project. *Humans of Karachi* has taken Jamil and her portraits to multiple countries, enabling travel-led research. This also, has given me the courage to embark on my own travels seeking out untold stories of the mis and underrepresented *Purdah* wearers.

Studying the historical, social, cultural and gendered contexts of veiling through writings by contemporary, Muslim feminist scholars, such as Reza Aslan and Dr. Homa Hoodfar has contributed to advancing my knowledge on the practice of *Purdah*. There were many myths and contradictions around *Purdah*, related to its origins and history that have aided in establishing a more nuanced and critical understanding of this practice of *Purdah*. Many of the scholars that have informed my thesis have spent decades researching the practice of *Purdah*, disputing its historical connection to Islam. Learning about *Purdah*, potentially having roots in Assyrian, ancient Greco-Roman and pre-Islamic Iranian and Byzantine empires has added new insights into my research. Establishing theoretical frameworks around the historical contexts of *Purdah*.

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<sup>30</sup> *Humans of Karachi. The Citizens Archive of Pakistan.*  
<http://www.citizensarchive.org/projects/humans-of-karachi/>.

Analyzing the lens based works of Shirin Neshat and Lalla Essaydi has also contributed to a nuanced understanding of veiling, while giving me an opportunity to investigate ways in which I can create critical works around the practice of Purdah. Both Neshat and Essaydi's works have helped me establish a methodological framework for my artworks on Purdah. Studying their works has allowed me to clarify my position; enlightening and inspiring new directions for me.

## Chapter 3: Epilogue

### *Summary*

In this thesis paper, *Purdah*, I record the diversity in the readings, meanings and interpretations of veils associated with Islam. I discuss various forms of *Purdah*, such as burqa, niqab and hijab interchangeably, while also showing the differences between these forms of *Purdah*. I discuss the concept of *Purdah* through a postcolonial, intersectional, feminist lens, while delving into *Purdah*'s social, historical, cultural and gendered contexts. This is achieved through the recording of lived experiences of *Purdah* observers as well as my own interpretations of *Purdah*. I look for opportunities where poetry and protest can align through the mediums I explore. This is most evident in the *Hallway* installation, *The Registry*. This thesis aims to better understand and acknowledge the nuances in the lives of the *Purdah* observers, as they navigate their identities in contemporary eastern and western societies. Through their narratives and lived experiences, that inform and inspire my conceptual undertakings, we are able to create space for stories that have previously been overlooked by western, hegemonic feminism. I investigate the ways in which visitors to the exhibition can participate, reflect and navigate a convergence of complexities of how race, class, gender and sexual orientation all intersect with *Purdah*.

I examine the topic of *Purdah* through the lens of Lacan, accompanied by a philosophical idea of the portable seclusion. This helps to deconstruct *Purdah*; specifically, burqa, in order to create a space that veils both itself and the viewers that enter it. This intersection of *Purdah* with architecture or *Burqatecture*, is directly informed by interaction with gendered, veiled spaces in ethnic restaurants, recorded over the course of my travels.

For me, this research into the practice of Purdah has unveiled scholarly works by contemporary, feminist scholars, such as Fatima Mernissi and Dr. Homa Hoodfar, who destabilize and dismantle the Western Quranic interpretations and translations of Purdah, as well as the orthodox, Islamic, patriarchal interpretations of Purdah. Apart from personal vested interest, Purdah the project has opened up new ways of thinking for me about intersectional feminism, where space needs to be made for people whose views may not always necessarily align with western, hegemonic feminism. My research into the practice of Purdah has enabled critical engagement with identity and the body. Further, deconstructing my identity as a diasporic, Muslim, female artist living between east and west investigating and problematizing the topic of Purdah. Advancing my knowledge about Purdah, while reconnecting with familial and ancestral relationship to Purdah, has contributed to growth and critical development in my art practice. The enriching narratives of family, friends and strangers that have generously contributed to Purdah serve as evidence of collaborations that celebrate diversity. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to meet the Purdah observers that are a crucial part of my research. Their stories, continue to surprise me, while informing my conceptual interpretations of Purdah.

### ***Future Trajectories***

I came into the Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design program at OCAD University as a photographer. During the two years of research into Purdah, my practice has expanded to incorporate video, poetry, text, sound, performance and installation. One of the photographs from Purdah, *You may veil us, but you will never dictate who we love* has been awarded at Pride Photo Awards (advised by World Press Photo) in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and has also been exhibited on a public billboard in Amsterdam. Performances undertaken during the course of the research into Purdah have been discussed at New York University, U.S and have also been exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada. Photographs, videos and narratives from the work have been published in magazines and blogs around the world, including but not limited to, Vice Canada, Vogue Italia and Of Note Magazine, NYC. The body of work encompassing Purdah is raising questions and prompting the public to shift perspective. The work is, also being compiled and archived digitally in the form of a blog ([purdahocad.tumblr.com](http://purdahocad.tumblr.com)) that has seen a growing following. Despite being trolled, by individuals indulging in hateful vitriol and intolerance of cultural practices such as Purdah, I am continuing my artistic engagement with the topic. In the future, I see the possibility of expanding this project into a documentary. The film will incorporate narratives and lived experiences of Purdah users spanning gender, class and ethnicity while critically evaluating the Western and Islamic patriarchies reactivity and desired control over Purdah users.

The two years of artistic engagement with Purdah has resulted in multiple failures and many successes. Under the guidance of my advisors, Professor Fatimah Tuggar and Professor Michelle Gay, as well as all other OCAD University faculty that took the time to critique my development; my practice has strengthened and evolved, allowing me to navigate each medium

and many concepts pertaining to Purdah with criticality and intentionality. When I first came into the program, I was creating orientalist, immature works about Purdah. Overtime, as my practice matured, my attention shifted toward Purdah users and their lived experiences.

Especially because I saw a huge lack in the representation of their voices. Granted that *Nike* now advertises hijabs for Muslim athletes and *Dolce & Gabbana* are selling high-end designer variations of Purdahcouture, but this does not mean that all Purdah users now have access to equitable standards of living. If anything, this media storm surrounding Purdah must be evaluated critically because it is evidence that a lot more needs to be done to garner inclusivity of diverse voices and ways of being.

Moving forward, I want to explore why a practice that contemporary, Muslim feminists are revising as not Islamic in origin, has become the ultimate marker of Muslim identity. I often ask myself, amidst this media frenzy around the Purdah, what of the voices of Muslims that ideologically choose not to observe Purdah, yet identify as Muslim, such as myself. We navigate a different set of complexities, problems and issues, because we are deemed not Muslim enough by both the western societies that adopt us and the orthodox, Muslim schools of thought that seek to enforce Purdah as mandatory. I will close this paper with an anecdote collected from my travels to Pakistan over the winter of 2016. An art professor was relating how she protested the closure of a women's gymnasium in Karachi, Pakistan. It was being demolished to make way for a mosque. Now, being that Karachi is a city with more mosques than public, communal spaces for women, the professor attempted to round up fellow feminists who would stand outside the contested location attempting to overturn the demolition. The professor did not have much luck at gathering enough of a crowd. She returned with a handful of people on the third day of the protests. Her entourage was met with hundreds of women in niqab, protesting the delays in

the demolition of the gym, pushing instead for the building of the mosque. Women are largely excluded from mosques in Pakistan based on their gender. The professor described the Purdah users as large in numbers, organized and assertive, with anonymity adding another layer of complexity to their gathering. My own personal politics would have called for preserving communal spaces for women. Yet, I cannot help but be intrigued by the confidence of the Purdah users taking to the streets in protest, with their portable seclusions.

As a Muslim woman, I choose not to ideologically observe Purdah. I want to continue investigating Purdah. How it is perceived as a practice in global contexts and how Purdah users navigate their nuanced and complex identities, bodies and genders through contemporary societies, shifting meanings, interpretations and readings in various parts of the world. As a Muslim woman, it is important for me to stress, that I do not support state imposed veiling, nor do I stand behind the banning of veils. I believe that all individuals have the right to choose how they dress; cover and uncover themselves, without interference from patriarchal systems of governance and law enforcement agencies. I also, believe that the world is large enough to celebrate inclusivity of diverse voices and I aim to contribute to this through art, critical investigation and mindful tolerance of individuals, even when their belief systems and ideologies may not align with mine.



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