



Debunking the Western Myth about the Veil in Yasmina Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul*

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Abstract :

The novels of the Algerian writer Yasmina Khadra, who is the most famous Arab writer in the world, are concerned with universal and contemporary issues like Islamic fundamentalism and the debate between Islam and the West. This article is a critical reading of Khadra's novel *The Swallows of Kabul*, which is set in Kabul under the reign of Taliban. The novel debunks the Western myth which associates Islam with terror and violence. The latter, as the novel vindicates, results from the misinterpretation of Islam by Taliban which used this religion to reinforce patriarchal ideologies and oppress women. In addition to his vehement criticism of Taliban's Islamic fundamentalism, Khadra tries to deconstruct the Western myth which demonizes the burqa and considers it as a means of oppression, disempowerment, marginalization, and objectification. Though Taliban confirms the Western stereotype of the burqa as an instrument of patriarchal oppression, Khadra's novel evinces the failure of Taliban to silence women and disempower them through imposing the burqa. The latter is used by Afghan women as a tool of empowerment, protest, and self-assertion.

Keywords:

The veil; The Burqa; Afghan Women; The Swallows of Kabul; Yasmina Khadra.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the war on terrorism that is always attributed to Islam, the veil has been a very controversial issue in the West. For Westerners, the veil is a symbol of oppression, subservience, segregation, subjugation, and repression. It is symbolic of Islamic civilization, and worse, it has been associated with terrorism since 9/11. In this regard, Mclarney states that in "the months leading up to 9/11 and in its immediate aftermath, American and British media demonized the burqa as 'Afghanistan's veil of terror', a tool of extremists and the epitome of political and sexual repression"(2009, p.1). Since the events of 9/11 and after the Islamic State's terroristic attacks, there have been rallying cries for unveiling in the West though

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banning the burqa is a violation of women's freedom and right to dress the way they like. The burqa is widely viewed as startling and horrifying by Westerners who have anti-Islamic sentiments. Indeed, Western countries have responded to terrorism by banning the burqa. Before the age of terrorism, the call for banning the burqa was on the ground that it prevents Muslims' integration in the public space. But with the rise of terrorism, some Westerners view the burqa as threatening to people's security. It is worth mentioning that hatred of the burqa dates back to the colonial period when the colonizers of Islamic countries wanted to unveil and undress women. So, terrorism has just exacerbated this disgust for the full-face covering.

Veiled women are seen by Westerners as anti-modern, primitive, and imprisoned. Hence, to be modernized, Muslim women must dress in the Western style. Ayotte and M. E. Hussain (2005) maintain that "many of these seeming celebrations of the liberation of Afghan women from the burqa implicitly rely on the voyeuristic orientalism of a promise to uncover women's bodies. The common theme running throughout this trope of 'unveiling' is the reduction of Afghan women's agency to their conformity to popular US notions of feminist liberation"(p.121). Orientalist discourse often associates gender oppression with veiling. This reductive discourse always resorts to Afghan women as the best example of women's oppression in the Islamic world.

Through the critical analysis of Yasmina Khadra's novel, *The Swallows of Babul*, this paper debunks the view that considers the burqa as a means of oppression, disempowerment, marginalization, and objectification. In Khadra's novel, Afghan women use the burqa as a means of empowerment and self-assertion. Significantly, the paper also debunks the Western myth that associates Islam with terror and violence.

2. Debunking the Western Misconception of the Veil/Burqa

Since the burqa is misconceived as restrictive to women's freedom, unveiling is understood as liberation. In fact, liberating the veiled Afghan women from Taliban is one of the root causes of occupying Afghanistan. Ayotte and Mary contend that the "representation of women's oppression was employed partly to demonize the Taliban and to prepare the US public for the air strikes that began on October 2001"(p.123). So, the US uses Taliban's oppression of women to legitimize its occupation of Afghanistan. They consider it as a merciful war to protect women whom they think are in dire need of being rescued from Taliban's patriarchal ideologies. However, the end of Taliban's rule showed that the burqa in itself was not a means of oppression. After the fall of Taliban regime, Afghan women continued to wear the encompassing garment. According to Shahira Fahmy, "Afghan women did not remove their burqas once Afghanistan was freed from the Taliban's repressive rule, particularly because of the cultural significance of the burqa. Historically, female covering has been deeply rooted in Afghan culture"(2004, p.91). The fact that Afghan women continued to wear the burqa after the Taliban rule means evinces that this all-encompassing garment is rooted in their culture and traditions, and it cannot be easily changed.

Though some Westerners misinterpret Islam as a misogynistic religion that confines and oppresses women by obliging them to wear the veil, the latter is a means of preserving their honor and purity. Muslim women wear conservative clothes to lessen their attraction to male strangers, because their beauty is likely to stir men's lustful desire. According to the teachings of Islam, women should not display their dazzling beauty to male strangers but only to their escorts, in other words, to their closest relatives like their brothers and husbands. The Qur'an requires women to dress in a modest way. In Surah Al Ahzab, God the almighty says: "O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) over their bodies (when outdoors). That is most convenient that they should be known and not molested"(33:59). Revealing women's beauty might be very harmful for them. So, the hijab precludes the greed of the sick hearts. In addition to that, bashfulness is one of the main characteristics of Muslim women, and the hijab fits bashfulness that is inherent in women's nature.

Displaying women's beauty might inflame men's sexual desire, thus, resulting in fornication. That is why the Prophet Mohammed (PBBUH) says: "I have not left after me any (chance) of turmoil more harmful to men than the harm done to men because of women"(Saheeh AlBukhari, p.5096). Revealing her beauty makes woman the object of men's gaze, and she might be a victim of their sexual harassment outside. When she wears the hijab, she shows that she is inaccessible and forbidden to other male strangers. By covering the most attractive parts of their body, women reject being possessed visually by the eyes of men who are strangers to them. In other words, women refuse to be commodities that are consumed by men's eyes. Their role is not to please and satiate men's desire in the public sphere. In fact, Muslim culture does not encourage sexual liberation. Thus, the veil asserts women's dignity and honor.

In an article published in *Journal de Démanche* on Sunday 14, 2016, seventeen ranking female French politicians tell their experiences of sexual harassment at work. These women, who do not wear the veil, were assaulted by male French politicians whose acts and comments are very offensive (Wang, 2016). Thus, removing the veil or the burqa does not liberate women, but it makes them subject to sexual abuse.

Whether the burqa is compulsory or not is a controversial issue among Islamic scholars. Some of them argue that since the wives of the prophet wore it, all Muslim women should take them as models. They assume that the face is the most attractive part of a female body. Thus, it should be covered. However, in many Islamic countries, it is a free choice to wear the burqa.

Throughout history, the veil was worn by women of high social rank, and it was symbolic of elitism. Abu-Rabia (2006) writes:

The first reference to veiling goes back to an Assyrian legal text from the thirteenth century B.C, which restricted the practice to 'respectful' women and forbade prostitutes from veiling [...] Historically, veiling was a sign of status

and was practiced by the elite in the ancient Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian and Byzantium empires. Thus, wearing the veil has already been observed before the time of Mohammed and the veil became the prerogative of women of a certain rank (p.91).

According to Abu-Rabia, during the middle ages in Europe, veiling was practiced by noble women and the Church “issued an edict that women should keep their hair covered”(p.91).

Since the end of the 19th century, women’s situation in Afghanistan had started to improve. Women were not obliged to stay at home. They had the right to education, and they got the right to vote in 1964. The veil was not imposed at that time, but women wore it voluntarily. According to the Article 27 of the 1977 Constitution, “The entire people of Afghanistan, women and men, without discrimination have equal rights and obligations before the law”(“The Taliban’s War”, 1998):

During the 1980s, and under the reign of the communist government, women were legally equal to men. Women’s conditions started to get worse with the coming of Taliban: “Soon after the Taliban took control of Kabul in September 1996, the Supreme Council issued edicts forbidding women to work outside the home, attend school, or to leave their homes unless accompanied by a mahram (husband, father, brother, or son)”. In public, women must be covered from head to toe in a burqa” (“The Taliban’s War”, 1998). Taliban’s rules restricted women’s freedom of thought and movement. Afghan women were denied the right to employment and education, and they were deterred from any involvement in the political life. Their responsibilities were restricted to domestic duties and childcare. In his study of Taliban’s social policy towards women, Goodson writes:

Just a short list of their gender policies includes forbidding women to work outside of the home, requiring women to wear a head-to-toe covering when they venture out into public, forbidding girls from attending school, preventing women from going out in public unless accompanied by a close male family member, preventing women from wearing certain kinds of clothing or Jewelry, applying harsh punishments for fornication and adultery, and using captured women from Afghanistan’s internal war as slaves (2001, p.415).

Women were treated in an inhuman and degrading way by Taliban. They were severely beaten and punished by Taliban for not following their rules, especially the strict dress code. Executions always took place publicly on Friday.

The issue of women is central to Taliban’s Islamization programme. This extremist Islamic group misinterprets Islam and practices it in the wrong way. They consider

women as second class citizens who have a subordinate position in the society though Islam respects women and gives them a privileged place. The Prophet (PBBUH) says; “The best amongst you is he who is the most kind to his wife and I am the kindest amongst you to my wives”^(Tirmidhi, p.3895). In another Hadith, the prophet Mohammed peace and blessing be upon him says: “Take my advice with regard to women: Act kindly towards women”^(Saheeh, Muslim, p.529).

Taliban’s gender policies, that were very harsh and anti-Islamic, have attracted a lot of worldwide attention. They were criticized and dismissed by many Muslim scholars, because they deviated from the teachings of Islam. Under the reign of Taliban, women suffer from degradation, discrimination, violence, and segregation. Though many women wear the burqa voluntarily, Taliban use it as a misogynistic and patriarchal symbol. Their fundamentalist religious doctrines define women as sexual creatures who tempt men into sexual sins.

3. Using the veil/Burqa as a Means of Female Empowerment

By using the burqa to oppress women, Taliban assert Westerners’ stereotype of this shroud. My paper evinces how women use the burqa as a means of self-assertion and empowerment; hence, they prove that they are able to fight back. The main characters of the novel are two married couples. The first are Mohsen Ramat and Zunaira, who are well educated; the second are Atiq Shaukat and Musarrat, who have a low level of education.

During the rule of Taliban, women, suffered from dire poverty. Many of them become beggars in the street, and men always respond to them with insults, violence, and humiliation. In the novel, these “segregated inside their grimy burqas, extend imploring hands and clutch at passerby; some receive a coin for their trouble, others just a curse. Often, when the women grow too insistent, an infuriated lashing drives them backward. But their retreat is brief, and soon they return to the assault, chanting their intolerable supplications”^(2002, p.5). The poor women shrouded in their all-encompassing burqas are probably widows, because Taliban do not allow women to go outside without a mahram, that is, a close relative either by birth or marriage. In fact, Afghan women’s socio-economic problems and their deprivation of human rights started years before Taliban’s ascendance to power. In this regard, Mertus writes:

Despite the way the Taliban exerts control over women by removing their right to employment, education, and mobility, and despite the egregious human rights abuses it commits against them, the Taliban cannot be blamed for all their suffering. The effect of the long years of war, poverty, poor nutrition, inadequate health care, stress, fear and depression have created untold misery for anyone in Afghanistan, especially for women ^(2000, p.158).

Women’s social conditions are worsened by Taliban’s severe and unwanted laws. For instance, they forcefully oblige all women to wear the burqa. The latter is used by

Taliban as a means of incarceration and confinement. In addition to the burqa which they wear against their will, they are also put in jail if they commit any small mistake. One night for instance, two militia women wrapped in their burqas went to the jail that was guarded by Atiq Shaukat. They entered the room where an imprisoned woman was performing her prayer. As soon as she finishes, they “begin to bind her tightly, pinioning her arms to her sides and trussing her legs together at midnight. Having verified that the cords are pulled taut and solidly knotted, they envelop the woman in a large sack of heavy cloth and push her ahead of them into the corridor”(pp.5-6). Prostitutes, like this woman, are humiliated and severely treated. They are executed in public, and they are stoned till death. Many people attend these ceremonies. In fact, Taliban’s religious philosophy is almost puritanical.

A woman, according to Taliban’s patriarchal ideology, should be a servant. Her sole role is to please her husband. She must always remain docile and obedient. Atiq Shaukat’s wife, Musarrat, is terribly ill. She can’t do her duties as a house wife, properly, like cleaning and cooking, and this makes Atiq very angry and bored.

Because she is very ill, Atiq prefers staying at the prison instead of going home, which he always finds unclean and untidy. He dislikes seeing his wife in the same position, “lying in a corner of the room with her knees pooled up to her chin, a filthy scarf on her head, and purple blotches on her face”(p.10). A woman, according to Islam, should not display her beauty and put the make up when she leaves the house, but she should do that at home. Musarrat never expresses her repudiation of the burqa. The violent demand for veiling by Taliban makes Musarrat wear the scarf even at home with her husband. Taliban’s patriarchal ideologies make Musarrat’s relationship with her husband stagnant. She lost her appeal because of her sickness. In a patriarchal society, a woman is worthy only if she is young and healthy.

Though he was dissatisfied with his wife’s illness, Atiq is sympathetic with her, and he even feel very sad. His friend Mirza who endorses Taliban’s patriarchal ideologies, finds it very strange that Atiq mentions to him the illness of his wife. For Mirza, a man should never talk about his wife in the street, because this is an offensive subject. Mirza, who denigrates women, suggests that Atiqu should divorce his sick wife, because she is useless. Atiq reminds him that she saved his life during the Soviet war, and this makes him eternally grateful and very much obliged to her. In response, Mirza says:

She took care of you *by the will of God*. She did nothing but submit to His will. What you did for her is a hundred times more valuable: you married her. What more could she hope for? She was three years older than you, already an old maid, with no vitality and no appeal. Can there be any greater generosity to a woman than to offer her a roof, protection, honor, and a name? You don’t owe her anything. She’s the one who should bow down before you,

Atiq, and kiss the toes of your feet, one by one, every time you take off your shoes (p.11).

Mirza misinterprets the Qur'an in accordance with his patriarchal ideologies. For him, a woman's role is to procure sexual pleasure to her husband. If a man gets married to a woman, then, this is in itself a very generous act that accords her some importance. Mirza denies the concept of love and intimacy between husband and wife. In Surah Arroum, Qur'an, God says: "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts)"(30:21). For Mirza, a wife is a slave to her husband, and she should bow in obedience for him. Mirza told Atiq that Mausarrat "has little significance outside of what you represent for her. She's only a subordinate. Furthermore, it's an error to believe that any man owes anything at all to a woman. The misfortune of the world comes from precisely that conception"(p.12). According to Mirza's patriarchal beliefs, a woman is valuable only as a wife. Moreover, she is second in terms of gender hierarchy, and she is totally subordinate and dependent on man. Mirza even considers Atiq's possible love for his wife as a sort of madness. He says: "You don't mean to tell me you're crazy enough to love her?"(p.12) Taliban's attitude towards women is very misogynistic. They view man's love for his wife as vitiating to his masculinity. They consider man's expression of emotions and passions as symptomatic of weakness and effeminacy.

Women for Mirza are exotic creatures that can't be understood. They are always mysterious. He says to Atiq:

I live with four women [...] I'm convinced that I'll never fully grasp how women think. It's as though their thought processes move counterclockwise. Whether you live one year or a century with a concubine, a mother, or your own daughter, you'll always feel that there's a gap somewhere [...] These creatures are intrinsically hypocritical and fundamentally unpredictable, and the more you think you're going to tame them,, the less chance you have of breaking their evil spell(p.13).

Mirza sympathizes with Atiq's miserable life which results from his ill and inadequate wife. He thinks that suffering because of a woman is against the teachings of their religion. Mirz advises Atiq: "Kick her out. Divorce her and get yourself a strong, healthy virgin who knows how to shut up and serve her master without making any noise. I don't want to see you talking to yourself like a mental patient again, not in the street, and especially not on account of a woman. That would be an offense against God and His prophet"(p.18). A woman, in Mirza's view, should be an ethereal lady who is invulnerable to old age and illness. She should never complain or express any resentment. She is expected to be an angel in the house, a perfect servant and slave.

In stark contrast to Atiq Ramat and Musarrat, Mohsen and Zunaira's relationship with each other is a very intimate one. They are well educated, and they are always very critical of Taliban's rule and their policies. Strangely enough, one day, Mohsen finds himself involved in the stoning of a prostitute, something he has never done before.; "In an access of unfathomable joy, he sees a red stain blossom at the spot where his stone has struck her"(p.8). Stoning a prostitute is a very joyful ceremony that everybody attends and takes part in. The prostitute was punished for her sordid affair in a humiliating way that was very insulting to human nature; "bloody and broken, the woman collapses and lies still. Her rigidity further galvanizes her executioners; their eyes rolled back, their mouths dripping saliva, they redouble their fury, as if trying to resuscitate their victim and thus prolong her torment"(p.8). The executioners felt encumbered by the onerous duty of killing this sinner as if she is a scapegoat on whom all the sins of the community are conferred. In their aggressive assaults, they step beyond the borders of humanity; "In their collective hysteria, convinced that they're exorcising their own demons through those of the succubus, some of them fail to notice that the crushed body is no longer responding to their attacks and that the immolated, half-buried woman is lying lifeless on the ground, like a sack of abomination thrown to the vultures"(p.8).

When he comes back to his reason, Mohsen does not believe that he could commit such an abominable act, and how the society could make him immersed in this horrible crime. After returning home, Mohsen confessed to his wife that he joined the group of people who stoned a prostitute till death. He told her sadly that he didn't know how he did it. He feels guilty, and he regretted doing this act, which he has never done, because he is an intellectual person. Zunaira was very shocked and disappointed to hear what her husband did. She found it difficult to forgive Mohsen and forget the act he performed, which is "primitive, barbarous, revolting, insane act"(p.29).

At the university, Zunaira was a very studious person. Her ultimate dream was to become a magistrate. But her hopes were doomed to failures with the coming of Taliban. As a university student, she also "wore assertive head scarves and modest dresses, sometimes over loose trousers, and actively campaigned for the emancipation of women"(p.29). Though Zunaira is an educated woman, she adhered to the Islamic principles, including wearing the scarf when she was at the university. So, modernity and civilization do not contradict with Islam. In addition to the scarf, Zunaira's way of dressing, before Taliban's reign, was very modest and respectful. The fact that she aspired to fight for women's rights when she was a university student evinces that women were denied many rights before the Taliban takeover. In this respect, Julie A. Mertus writes: "While international publicity has highlighted the loss of Afghan women's rights under the Taliban, little has surfaced about the abuse of women in earlier years during the Soviet occupation, when armed fighters on all sides raped, abducted and trafficked in women, girls, and boys"(2000, p.58).

Before her marriage to Mohsen, Zunaira's "zeal was unmatched, save by the praises heaped upon her. She was a brilliant girl, and her beauty lifted every heart. The boys

never tired of devouring her with their eyes. All of them dreamed of marrying her”(p.29) Before getting married, many men fell deeply in love with Zunaira. They were impressed and mesmerized by her beauty that is beyond expression. Without the burqa, it was very easy for everybody to see her ineffable charm. That is why the burqa is probably a means of preserving the woman’s purity. It shelters her from the insidious stares. However, women cannot be forcefully obliged to wear the burqa. This should rather be a spontaneous and voluntary act and must not be imposed upon them.

It took Zunaira a long time to forgive her husband for being involved in the savage and horrible act of stoning a prostitute. After mending their disagreement, Mohsen invites his wife Zunaira to go outside for a walk, but she refused to avoid any problems with Taliban. Besides, she didn’t want to wear the burqa, which renders her anonymous. She says: “There will always be some foul-smelling ogre, armed to the teeth, who’ll reprimand us and forbid us to speak outdoors. Rather than being subjected to such insults, I prefer to stay inside my own four walls. Here at home, at least, when I see my reflection in the mirror, I don’t have to hide my face”(p.30). Zunaira refuses Mohsen’s invitation to evade Taliban’s orders and instructions which expect women to behave in certain ways outside. One of Taliban’s edicts, for instance, forbids women to talk to their husbands outside. For Zunaira, the house as a prison is much better than the prison of the burqa which she will be obliged to wear out of Taliban’s pressure. This shroud diminishes her status and her freedom. Ayotte and Husain state: “When forcibly imposed, the burqa becomes a misogynistic instrument of terror designed to objectify women, relegating their social status to that of ‘chatell’ by making them literally invisible in the Afghan public sphere”(2005, p.128).

Mohsen tries to convince Zunaira that as well educated people, they should not let Taliban determine or destroy their life. He thinks that education is the only means of resisting Taliban’s tyranny. He says: “The only means of resistance we have left, the only chance we have to reject the tyranny and barbarism, comes from our upbringing and our education. We were taught to be complete human beings [...] We can’t accept being treated like cattle”(p.31).

Zunaira hesitated a lot to accept Mohsen’s invitation to go out for a walk, because she cannot bear the humiliation and aggressive assaults of Taliban. Furthermore, if she goes out, she must wear the all-enveloping horrible garment she dislikes too much, because it renders her anonymous and identity-less. That is, it deprives her of a sense of selfhood. The burqa for her is a means of imprisonment, especially that she aspired to fight for women’s emancipation when she was a university student. She says,

I refuse to wear a burqa. Of all the burdens they’ve put on us, that’s the most degrading. The Shirt of Nessus wouldn’t do as much damage to my dignity as that wretched getup. It cancels my face and takes away my identity and turns me into an object. Here, at least, *I’m me*, Zunaira, Mohsen Ramat’s wife, age thirty-two, former magistrate, dismissed by obscurantists without a hearing

and without compensation, but with enough self-respect left to brush my hair every day and pay attention to my clothes. If I put that damned veil on, I'm neither a human being nor an animal, I'm just an affront, a disgrace, a blemish that has to be hidden. That's too hard to deal with. Especially for someone, who was a lawyer, who worked for women's rights(p.31).

Zunaira refuses to leave the house, because she does not want to comply with Taliban's restrictive clothes. She sees the burqa as a ridiculous outfit and a dehumanizing shred that devalues and effaces women.

Zunaira accepts Mohsen's invitation for a walk outside, but they were interrupted by Taliban for the simple reason that Mohsen laughed loudly in the street. As soon as he burst laughing, a group of Taliban surrounded him. A Taliban police agent shouted at him, ordering him to shut up, because it is forbidden to laugh in the street. The stringent policy that Taliban follows does not have a ring of truth in Islam. Besides, Islam does not give anyone the right to intervene in the private life of married couples. However, in Kabul, "pleasure has been ranked among the deadly sins"(p.14).When Zunaira pulled her husband by the arm, asking him to go home, a Taliban agent shouted, "Don't touch him, and Stay in your place! [...] And don't speak in the presence of a stranger"(p.36). Women are not supposed to talk in the street. Under the reign of Taliban, women are expected to remain mute, speechless, and motionless. In fact, Taliban's fundamentalism is not just oppressive of women. It makes even men completely controlled.

Taliban agents obliged Mohsen to go and attend Mullah Bachir's preaching while his wife was waiting for hours outside, melting inside her burqa in a very hot weather. While her husband, Mohsen, is in the mosque listening to imam, "Mummified under her veil, Zunaira is suffocating. Anger knots her stomach and obstructs her throat. A mad desire to lift the cloth in search for a hypothetical breath of fresh air intensifies her nervousness"(p.38). Waiting in the street for her husband, she was subject to people's curiosity and all sorts of suspicion, and this irritates her, torments her, and makes her feel great embarrassment. She feels objectified by people's eyes;

The urge to flee-to return home at once and slam the door behind her and never leave her house again-convulses her mind. Why did she agree to go along with her husband? What did she expect to find in the streets of Kabul except insults and squalor? How could she have consented to put on this ludicrous outfit, this getup that annihilates her; this portable tent that constitutes her degradation and her prison, with its webbed mask over her eyes like the kaleidoscopic grillwork over a window, its gloves, which

take away her sense of touch, its weight and injustice?(p.38).

Zunaira was obliged to repress her outrage and to remain calm and still, because any mistake will not be forgiven by Taliban.

In fact, not just Mohsen, but many people attended the speech of Mullah unwillingly; “Behind the first rows, opinions are divided; the mullah’s prolixity instructs some and bores others. Many in the congregation, here against their will and displeased at having to neglect their business, wring their hands and shift about continually”(p.39). While the Mullah is delivering his speech, Mohsen was thinking about Zunaira. He is sure that she is suffocating inside the burqa under the hot sun. He also knows that Zunaira detests being displayed to people’s eyes, because she is a very timid and reserved person.

After the Mullah’s speech, Zunaira and Mohsen returned home, but Zunaira refused to talk to him or to stay with him. The incident in the street of Kabul prevents Mohsen and Zunaira from going on with life as usual. Mohsen has deeply regretted taking his wife out, because there is no romanticism in a world ruled by Taliban; “How could he have believed that lovers’ promenades were still possible in a city that looks like a hospice for the moribund, overrun with repellent fanatics whose eyes stare out of the dark backward and abysm of time?”(p.48) In Taliban’s philosophy, love and pleasure are sinful and satanic.

The incident in the street makes Zunaira behave in a hysterical way; “she shut herself in a room and started howling like a madwoman”(p.48). Zunaira decides to punish Mohsen by wearing the burqa forever, hence preventing her husband from seeing her beautiful face again; “ From morning until night, she haunts the house like a ghost, obstinately wrapped up in her shroud of misfortune, which she doesn’t even take off to go to bed”(48) Preventing him from seeing her face is a severe punishment to Mohsen, who begged her to remove the burqa; “Your face is the only sun I have left [...] Don’t hide it from me”(p.48). Zunaira’s prevention of Mohsen from seeing her face shows that Muslim women are very powerful and not psychologically weak as they are erroneously represented in Western discourse. Zunaira torments Mohsen by refusing to appear very pretty in his eyes. Thus, the burqa which she always views as a means of disempowerment, ironically, becomes a means of empowerment and self-assertion.

Mohsen’s life with the woman he loves turns into a nightmare. She becomes violent and hateful to her husband. Mohsen vents his indictment of Taliban who have “the power of life and death over everything that moves”(p.49). Mohsen even cries in front of Zunaira in desperation, but the sight of a man in tears does not break her heart and make her change her mind about him. Zunaira has put barriers between her and her husband, and she decided to end her life with him; “*I don’t even want to see you again, Mohsen. Those aren’t just empty words, and the passing days won’t mellow them. I*

want you out of my life, I don't want you back in this house. And if you stay here, I'll go away"(p.50).

In an exchange between Mohsen and Zunaira, who refused to remove the burqa after the incident in the street, Mohsen angrily asked her to take off the burqa. Zunaira replies: "Impossible. The *Sharia* of our country requires me to wear it"(p.51). She adds: "Ask the Taliban for permission first. Go on, let's see what kind of guts you have. Go to them and demand that they change their law, and I promise that I take off my veil immediately"(p.51). Zunaira challenges Mohsen to face Taliban and disobey their laws. She does not want him to follow their teachings, because this makes their life with each other impossible. Unconscious of what he did, Mohsen strikes his wife. In an encounter between them, Zunaira pushed Mohsen, who falls down and dies after hitting his head. Because she killed her husband, though accidentally, Zunaira was taken to jail by Taliban.

When alone in the prison, Zunaira takes off the burqa, and Atiq was inflamed when he saw her face. He beholds the

magical vision: the prisoner has removed her burqa!
She's sitting cross-legged on the floor [...] Atiq is
thunderstruck. Never before has he seen such splendor.
With her goddess's profile, her long hair spread across her
back, and her enormous eyes, like horizons, the condemned
woman is beautiful beyond imagination. She's like a dawn,
gathering brightness in the heart of this poisonous, squalid,
fatal dungeon(p.56).

Atiq gazed at Zunaira for a long time, and he could not lower his eyes. Her beauty was beyond expression. In Islam, men are advised to walk modestly and not to raise their eyes. Zunaira whom Khadra has silenced, at the end of the novel, should have realized that the burqa wards off men's insidious desires and that it is a safeguard against men's lustful drives. The Prophet Mohammed (PBBUH) says: "The adultery of the eyes is the lustful look"(Saheeh Al Bukhari, p.6612). Zunaira's beauty stirs Atiq's deep latent desires, and he finds it difficult to restrain himself in front of the woman who provokes lust in him. In fact,

Except for his wife's, Atiq hasn't seen a woman's face for many years. He's even learned to live without such sights. For him, women are only ghosts, voiceless, charmless ghosts that pass practically unnoticed along the streets; flocks of infirm swallows-blue, yellow, often faded, several seasons behind-that make a mournful sound when they come into the proximity of men(p.56).

Not only was Atiq struck by Zunaira's beauty, but seeing her without the burqa, which was a forbidden sight, makes him change his mind regarding women. He used

to see them shrouded in their burqas, anonymous creatures, who exist only as ghostly appearances, that is, as non-human beings. He never thought that behind the burqa lurks such an unspeakable beauty.

Atiq gave food to the prisoner, and he was very sympathetic with her. Atiq told his sick wife Musarrat about Zunaira and her beauty, and he avowed to her that Zunaiara's charm distracted him from his prayers. Musarrat, with her naivety, was very happy to see that her husband has changed, and she heard him speak poetically for the first time. She avows that she is grateful to the woman who stirs her husband's emotions and his sensitivity. Atiq fell deeply in love with Zunaira, and this makes Mausarrat blissfully happy.

Zunaiara's fate, unfortunately, is to be excuted for her crime, and that is why Atiq went and begged Qassim Abdul Jabbar to forgive her. Qassim refusd because this will be a great ceremony which will be attended by prestigious guests. This makes Atiq realize the rigid and unfair laws of Taliban. He says: "Qassim is nothing but a brute. He has no more heart than a cudgel, no more mercy than a snake. He embodies the common evil, and he will die of it. They will *all* die of it"(p.62). Atiq comes to realize the brutality and inhumanity of Taliban, who are going to kill the woman he loves for an accidental crime that she never meant to commit.

Musarrat, who was very ill, suggested to Atiq to be executed instead of Zunaira. The surrogate victim wanted to terminate her suffering and to do anything which makes Atiq happy. She says: "In a little while, before they come to get her, lock her in your office. I'll slip into her cell. It won't be anything but one burqa taking another's place. Nobody will bother to check the identity of the person underneath. It'll all go very smoothly; you'll see"(p.68). The burqa, which replaces female identity for Taliban, makes Mausarrat's offering to die in place of Zunaira possible. The shroud that Zunaira thinks renders her lifeless saves her life. It becomes a means of resistance, empowerment, and emancipation.

After the execution of Musarrat whom all people think that it is Zunaira, the latter who was attending the ceremony disappeared short after the stoning of Musarrat till death. Atiq searched for Zunaira. He started shouting and screaming in the street like a mad man. He stops all passing women, and he imagines that each one might be Zunaira. Women were scared and frightened, and they run away. He even lifts the burqas of women with the intent of recognizing the face of the woman he loves. His commitment of the unforgivable sin of uncovering the women's faces that should be hidden in public outraged these women's escorts (Mahrams). The latter feel dishonoured, and hence, ask for his punishment. He was stoned and beaten bitterly till bleeding. "A few fragmented shouts reached his ears amid the rain of blows that keep him pinned to the ground. *Hang him! Crucify him! Burn him alive!*"(p.76). Not just in Taliban's religion, but in Islam, honor of women must be preserved, and its violation is a serious sin. Honor pushes Muslim men to safeguard the closest female relatives to them from male strangers. In fact, jealousy exists in all the hearts of true Muslim men.

4. CONCLUSION

Though Yasmina Khadra's representation of the burqa for Western readers is somehow reductive, our paper vindicates that neither Islam nor the burqa are the root causes of women's oppression. The latter emanates mainly from Taliban's fundamentalist doctrines and their puritanical interpretations of religious texts. The burqa might be seen as oppressive only if it is worn out of choice. The burqa which is demonized by some Westerners is worn by most Muslim women out of personal faith. Therefore, there is a need to reconsider the image of the veil/burqa and Muslim women that are often distorted in Western discourse.

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