

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Writing Politics and Piety on Women's Bodies: A Study of the Duppatta Debate in Pakistan

Consider the following *Times of India* headline: “The Case of the Disappearing Duppatta.”¹ The author writes about a new shift in India and Pakistan where women are foregoing the duppatta (thin, gossamer veil) hinting at a new sensibility where “modern” women should not have to cover with a scarf/veil. *Writing Politics and Piety* will take up this point with a geo-spatial focus on Pakistan. Pakistan provides a compelling case study because despite the desire to construct a wholly distinct Islamic identity, there is much debate as to what dress accurately represents the body politic and ideology. By highlighting the sartorial practices of Muslim women in Pakistan, my research will depart from existing scholarship on Muslim women, the veil and/or the recent growth of Islamic fashion, by moving beyond the polemics of either Islam or the “West” to instead capture the complexities found within a Muslim-majority population. It will provide a glimpse into how dress is crucial to the construction of religious, cultural and national identity, and will demonstrate how narrations of public piety, Islamic identity, religious and cultural edicts of modesty, political aspirations and further, notions of belonging and citizenship impact gender and sartorial expressions in Pakistan. The objective of the study is to complicate the reader’s understanding of the ubiquitous head scarf/hijab/veil, and the notion of a universal Islamic dress by “unveiling” the way Pakistani women negotiate with a multiplicity of ideologies, religious and cultural prescriptions, and intractable domestic issues with their clothing choices.

This travel grant will provide me the opportunity to collect data through archival historical research (Citizens Archive of Pakistan), media analysis and informal participatory interviews with local Pakistani designers, social bloggers and fashion journalists. I will engage with the gendering of dress, examine it as a site for performing culture, religion and politics in Pakistan, and analyze how women craft political and social identities through “invented” dress. Utilizing historical and contemporary examples from Pakistan, I will examine how the fashioning of dress is interlinked to the self-(re)presentation of Pakistani citizens on the national and trans-national political stage. So while I fear colluding with the Western preoccupation with Islamic dress and do not want to bolster reductive representations of Muslim women by focusing on what they wear, I also believe sartorial histories are relevant in the Muslim women’s struggle for self-determination and empowerment and have a contributive effect on citizenship discourse. I will explore how dress signifies definitive national ideas of masculinity/femininity, religion/secularism and tradition/modernity, and how these ideas are inextricably linked to the policing of women’s bodies and moreover, to the “shifts in women’s inclusion and exclusion from citizenship of the body politic” (Roces and Edwards, 4)². I will engage with following questions: What are the political and religious functions of dress in public space? In what ways does dress advance political and religious programs in Pakistan? Can the adoption of dress be an exercise of cultural and political subversion? Further, can dress be a tool of empowerment for Pakistani women?

For your reference, I hold an adjunct position at Merrimack College in North Andover, MA. Additionally, I am a US citizen.

¹Sharma, Purnima. “The Case of the Disappearing Duppatta.” *The Times of India*, online edition. January 8, 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/The-case-of-the-disappearing-duppatta/articleshow/28558894.cms>.

² Roces, Mina, and Louise Edwards, eds. *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas*. Great Britain: Sussex Academic Press, 2007.