

Fashion as a Tool of Modernity and Female Empowerment in the Nineteenth-Century Zenana

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Abstract : This paper looks at the role of fashion and clothes in the context of the late nineteenth-century Indian zenana. It suggests that fashion and clothes served as tools for self-assertion and empowerment among the zenana women, allowing them to negotiate between tradition and modernity and establish themselves as modern subjects. In pre-Independence India and in upper-class Indians households, zenana was women's part of the house, where women lived separately from men and in seclusion (purdah). To male colonial scholars and officials, zenana remained impenetrable, inviting speculations about the position of the zenana women. In the colonial imagination, the Indian woman was not only the helpless victim, oppressed by the Indian man but also the agent of deviant sexuality. Consequently, in the colonial British scholarship, zenana was portrayed as a space of idleness, perverse sexuality, ignorance, and illness. Contrary to the dominating ideas about zenana, some Western women writers presented more varied accounts of the zenana life, noting on the good education, dignified manners, and sophisticated fashion choices of the women in the zenana. Contemporary research by postcolonial scholars shows that zenana women in purdah travelled, had access to education and political power. The history of India has examples of women rulers in purdah and more than enough instances of zenana women influencing politics and culture. Zenana, in short, was not an ahistorical, dark realm of idleness but the space of culture and a space impacted by modernity. The paper proves that in the context of zenana, clothes, and fashion provided a visual vocabulary for the women to establish themselves as modern subjects and negotiate between modernity and tradition. To do so, it relies on photographs of zenana women and written accounts about and from the nineteenth-century zenana.

Keywords : woman's fashion, colonial India, modernity, zenana

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