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Shame and Safety Pins: Dress controversy and ‘moral technologies’ in 1900s Urdu magazines for women

Eve Tignol
CNRS/CESAH (EHESS, Paris)

Abstract:

This article interrogates changing bodily practices of shame (*sharm*) in colonial India at a time when a Muslim national identity was being shaped and gender expectations were questioned with the growing presence of women in the public sphere. Focusing on a controversy on Muslim dress reform in two Urdu periodicals for women, *Tahzīb un-Niswān* (“Ladies’ Culture”, a weekly from Lahore) and *Khātūn* (“Madam”, a monthly from Aligarh) in 1905-1907, I examine the way upper- and middle-class women navigated Islamic prescriptions and Western ideas of ‘progress’ while debating the contours of community identities. In the quest to safeguard their modesty, the new technology of the safety pin offered a creative solution. This article argues that it played an active role in allowing for new practices of female modesty and in creating tensions around group (*qaum*) formation in British India.

dress – emotions – Islam – femininity – technology

For a few decades now, historians have shown that emotions have a history. While Johan Huizinga or Norbert Elias argued in the 1920s-1930s that the process of ‘civilization’ came with an increasing control over affects, historians now rather work at documenting how emotions themselves change over time, and how they act as historical agents.¹ Emotions being considered culturally embedded communicative practices, a common methodology for their study is to interrogate language. Historians have hence often tapped into textual sources and linguistic expressions of feelings to reconstruct past emotional worlds. Yet, as many have noted, the history of sensibility can hardly do without taking into consideration the sensorial, the material, and the everyday, as emotions are not just ‘something we have’, but something we

I am very grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their stimulating comments. I also thank Margrit Pernau and Frederik Schröer, the participants in the Colloquium “South Asia in a Global Perspective” at Max-Planck Institute, especially Gayatri de Souza, and my colleagues at the Centre for South Asian and Himalayan Studies (CESAH), especially Vanessa Caru for reading drafts.

¹ Lucien Febvre, ‘La sensibilité et l’histoire: Comment reconstituer la vie affective d’autrefois?’, *Annales d’histoire sociale* 3, no. 1/2 (Jan-Jun, 1941), 5-20; About emotions as ‘historical agents’, see Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, *Politiques des émotions au Moyen Âge* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2010); William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

‘do’.² Among others, Monique Scheer has encouraged historians to think of emotions as a kind of practice, entrenched in the body,³ thereby following Pierre Bourdieu who argued about Berber society that ‘honor is a permanent disposition embedded in the agents’ very bodies’ with his famous concept of habitus.⁴

Shame in the South Asian context has typically been described as an emotion that one *performs*, particularly women, as is reflected by language (*sharm/lāj karnā* or ‘doing shame’ in Urdu/Hindi). Anthropologists like Patricia Jeffery or Catherine Thompson, as well as scholars studying female seclusion or veiling, have highlighted the omnipresence of *sharm* (shame, modesty) in everyday experiences of women,⁵ shame being considered a ‘central concept in “femininity”’.⁶

In British India, the code of modesty that was imposed on upper- and middle-class (*ashrāf*) Muslim and Hindu women was called purdah (*parda*). Literally meaning ‘curtain’, and thus evoking the material texture of cloth, the purdah system broadly refers to a set of practices of social distancing, which includes veiling and seclusion.⁷ The literal meaning of purdah as

² For instance, Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine and Georges Vigarello (eds), *Histoire des émotions*, 3 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2016-2017).

³ Monique Scheer, ‘Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and is that what Makes Them have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion’, *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (May 2012), 193-220.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 15.

⁵ Patricia Jeffery, *Frogs in a Well: Indian women in purdah* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000, 1st ed. 1979); Catherine Thompson, ‘A Sense of *Sharm*: Some Thoughts on its Implications for the Position of Women in a Village in Central India’, *South Asia Research* 1, no. 2 (1981), 39-53. Benedict Grima, *The Performance of Emotions among Paxtun Women: “The Misfortunes which have befallen me”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Eunice De Souza, *Purdah: an Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: modesty, privacy and resistance* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

⁶ Himani Bannerji, ‘Attired in Virtue: Discourse on Shame (*Lajja*) and Clothing of the Gentlewoman (*Bhadramahila*) in Colonial Bengal’, in *The Ideological Condition: Selected Essays on History, Race and Gender*, ed. H. Bannerji (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 241.

⁷ For a comparison between Hindu and Muslim practices see Dorothy Ann Jacobson, ‘Hidden Faces: Hindu and Muslim Purdah in a Central Indian Village’ (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1970); Hanna Papanek, ‘Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15, no. 3 (1973), 289-325); Sylvia Vatuk, ‘Purdah revisited: A comparison of Hindu and Muslim interpretations of the cultural meaning of purdah in South Asia’, in *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, ed. H. Papanek and G. Minault (New Delhi: Chanakya, 1982), 54–78. About purdah in early twentieth century India and Urdu magazines, see Asiya Alam, *Women, Islam and Familial Intimacy in Colonial South Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2021) and Melina Gravier, ‘La controverse du *pardah*

textile – whether it referred to the curtain which separated men’s and women’s quarters (the *zanāna*) or to the veil – makes of cloth a fundamental tool in the bodily practice of female shame. As Richard Antoun has underlined, the protection of collective honor has often been associated with a need ‘to clothe the woman’.⁸ In the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata*, god Krishna emblematically intervened to prevent the humiliation of Draupadi (and her clan) who was being disrobed by a lewd Dushasana through the provision of unlimited layers of sari cloth. In British India too, proper ways of covering one’s body remained essential indicators of virtue, respectability, and ‘civilization’.

In this article, I focus on a controversy about the proper way of displaying *sharm* through sartorial practices, which occurred in two popular Urdu women’s magazines in 1905-1907. The series initially revolved around the project of finding one ‘community’ (e.g. Muslim) dress. It reflected broader political developments in British India: dress was emerging in politics during the Swadeshi movement (1905-1911) when nationalists rejected British garments in favor of Indian clothes and cloth to recover power and agency. Mahatma Gandhi’s later experiments with the cotton dhoti reinforced the association between dress and national identity. The nationalization of the *Nīvī* sari (a draping style from South India) in colonial India also participated in the homogenization of clothing practices for the formation of national identities.⁹ The issue of finding an appropriate Muslim dress reflected contemporary endeavors to form a pan-Indian Muslim political organization, the All India Muslim League which was founded in

dans les journaux de femmes en hindi et en ourdou (1918-1919)’ (Master thesis, Université de Lausanne, 2018).

⁸ Richard Antoun, ‘On the Modesty of Women in Arab Muslim Villages: A Study in the Accommodation of Traditions’, *American Anthropologist* 70, no. 4 (August 1968), 681.

⁹ For instance, Kaamya Sharma, ‘The Orientalisation of the Sari – Sartorial Praxis and Womanhood in Colonial and Post-Colonial India’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 2 (2019), 219-236; Arundhati Virmani, ‘Le sari à l’européenne. Vêtement et militantisme en Inde coloniale’, *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 36 (2012), 129-152; Abigail McGowan, ‘An All-Consuming Subject? Women and Consumption in Late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Western India’, *Journal of Women’s History* 18, no. 4 (2006), 31-54.

1906, three years before Muslims were officially recognized as a separate political community in British India.

Departing from studies which emphasize the relatively passive role of contemporary Indian women in moving from the confined inner quarters of their homes to yet another (textile) ‘prison’,¹⁰ I argue for the productive, agentive, interaction between Urdu-speaking women and the *materiality* of attire. I explore the role of the safety pin, not as a mere intermediary of human action but as a mediator, and I illustrate the impact of the technology on morality and modest behavior as it irrupted in the lives of Indian women. Finally, rather than revealing the contours of a homogeneous Muslim community, I suggest that dress and safety pins unveil the difficult definition of collective identity around notions of respectability and Islamic orthodoxy in the colonial world.

Early twentieth century women’s periodicals

Scholarship has emphasized the role of women’s periodicals in reforming domesticity, redefining norms of respectability, and reconfiguring gender relationships in the colonial world.¹¹ Engaging with both Indian reformist projects and colonial discourses opposing ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarity’, women’s magazines in Indian languages offered a platform to discuss and promote new patterns of behavior, as respectability (*sharāfat*) became less associated with hereditary status and more with individual deportment and values, like hard work, punctuality, cleanliness, and self-discipline.¹² Unsurprisingly, in the quest for an

¹⁰ Himani Bannerji, “Textile Prison: discourse on shame (*Lajja*) in the attire of the gentlewoman (*badhramahila*) in colonial Bengal”, *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 19, no.2, 1994, 169-193.

¹¹ See for instance, *ibid.*; Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in colonial India: what women learned when men gave them advice* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); Judith E. Walsh, *How to be the goddess of your home: an anthology of Bengali domestic manuals* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005); Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the ideal educated girl: the production of desirable subjects in Muslim South Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

¹² Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the ideal educated girl*, 24; see also Margrit Pernau, *Ashraf into middle classes: Muslims in nineteenth-century Delhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

improved ‘civilized’ behavior, shame became a key notion: so much so that, as Himani Bannerji noted, Bengali women’s journals comprised ‘whole treatises’ on it.¹³

The two periodicals that I analyze were among the ‘big three’ women’s magazines in Urdu that Gail Minault has presented in some detail.¹⁴ They were part of this new flourishing landscape of vernacular female periodicals from across British India that provided women with a public voice since the 1890s. As Mohammed Afzal and Megan Robb have rightly noted, the contributions of secluded women was yet not a given because of the ‘persistent taboo against women publishing written word’, even in *zanāna* (women’s) periodicals.¹⁵ The threat that public writing posed to female modesty often transpired from their publications: women frequently confessed the shame that they felt and the courage that they needed to finally send their contributions.¹⁶ In July 1905, in an article titled ‘inopportune shame’ (*be-mauqa ‘sharm*), Abdul Wadud Abul Kamal from Bareilly regretted that ‘people still think badly of women writing in *zanāna* papers [considering] that their writings might fall under the gaze of unknown men’.¹⁷ Like contemporary Hindi or Bengali journals, *Tahzīb un-Niswān* and *Khātūn* encouraged women to speak up, promoted female education, publicized women’s initiatives, and provided female ‘role models’.¹⁸

¹³ Himani Bannerji, ‘Textile Prison’, 176.

¹⁴ Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). I accessed the issues digitized by the British Library’s *Endangered Archives Programme* and *Rekhta.org*.

¹⁵ Megan Robb, ‘Women’s Voices, Men’s Lives: Masculinity in a North Indian Urdu newspaper’, *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no. 5 (2016), 1441-1473, 1446; Mohammed Afzal, ‘Gendering the Urdu domestic novel: Muhammadi Begum, Abbasi Begum, and the women question’, in *Sultana’s Sisters: Genre, Gender, and Genealogy in South Asian Muslim Women’s Fiction*, ed. Haris Qadeer and P. K. Yasser Arafath (London: Routledge, 2021), 79-97; Khanday Pervaiz Ahmad, ‘Breaking the Silence: South Asian Muslim Women Begin to Write in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century’, in *Pakistan Journal of Women’s Studies* 33, no. 2 (2016), 71-90.

¹⁶ *Tahzīb*, 10, 29, July 20, 1907, 347; *Tahzīb*, 10, 40, October 5, 1907, 488.

¹⁷ *Tahzīb*, 8, 29, July 29, 1905, 295-296.

¹⁸ Francesca Orsini, ‘Domesticity and Beyond: Hindi Women’s Journals in the early twentieth century’, *South Asia Research* 19, no. 2 (1999), 137-160, 138-139 and 154.

Tahzīb un-Niswān ('Ladies' Culture', 1898-1949), the first weekly magazine for ladies, was edited in Lahore by a woman, Muhammadi Begum, until her death in 1908,¹⁹ and managed by her husband Sayyid Mumtaz Ali. *Khātūn* ('Madam', 1904-1914) was edited by Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah, successor of Mumtaz Ali as Secretary of Education for the women section at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, and his wife, Wahid Jahan.²⁰ They were both progressive north Indian papers owned by Muslim *ashraf* closely associated with the modernist movement of Aligarh, which was then busy opening a Girls' School (f. 1906). Despite their similar background and ideas, the relationship between Mumtaz Ali and Shaikh Abdullah was not a smooth one: when the latter wished to launch his own paper, he felt the need to publish a disclaimer denying any desire to compete with Mumtaz Ali and *Tahzīb un-Niswān*.²¹ In September 1905, Mumtaz Ali nonetheless published a 'review' of *Khātūn* complaining: 'I had warned *Khātūn* of such issues [i.e. rambling about the same topics], but they did not listen. ... It completely looks like *Tahzīb un-Niswān* but of a lower quality.'²²

The magazines were nonetheless different. *Tahzīb un-Niswān* (hereafter *Tahzīb*) was a weekly, dozen-page periodical which included, in simple Urdu language, news and announcements, feature articles and short stories about women issues, advice of all kinds from cleaning tips to remedies for scorpion bites, recipes, illustrations, correspondence, and advertisements. The end section entitled *Mahfil-e Tahzīb* ('The Assembly of *Tahzīb*') encouraged letters from '*Tahzīb* sisters' who regularly commented on articles, asked for help

¹⁹ About Muhammadi Begum, see Naim Tahir, *Sayyida Muhammadī Begum aur Unkā Khāndān* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel Publications, 2018); Mohammed Afzal, 'Gendering the Urdu domestic novel'; Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 110-122; Melina Gravier, 'La controverse du *pardah*'.

²⁰ Shadab Bano, 'Reform and Identity: Purdah in Muslim Women's Education in Aligarh in the early twentieth century', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 73 (2012), 608; see also Shadab Bano, 'Wahid Jahan, a reformer's wife and partner in Muslim women's reform at Aligarh', *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 25, no. 1 (2018), 1-14.

²¹ Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 123.

²² *Tahzīb*, 8, 36, September 9, 1905, 374-5.

and advice (did the advertised product for fair skin work?)²³ or simply shared personal news (weddings, funerals, or even the premature death of a pet chick).²⁴ *Khātūn* in comparison was weightier. It provided lengthy essays and reports on women's conferences and initiatives bound in more substantial monthly 50-page volumes, which sometimes contained a few good quality black and white photographs. It also occasionally included 'high' literature, like Hali's famous poem about women's ordeals (*Chup kī Dād*) in 1905.

Most contributors and targeted readers of both magazines were married *pardanashīn* (i.e. 'secluded') *ashrāf* women from across British India – *Khātūn* also addressed male members of the Muhammadan Educational Conference.²⁵ Most authors and correspondents were Muslim but Hindu 'sisters' also participated in discussions. Some columnists were among the most respected women of the time like Rahat Begum (wife of Badruddin Tyabji), Zehra Begum (sister of Atiya Fyzee), Amir un-Nisa (wife and cousin of Mian Muhammad Shafi) or Abru Begum (sister of Abul Kalam Azad). They created a dynamic network of interaction: *Tahzīb* correspondents often emphasized the way the magazine acted as a platform to get in touch with other women to break solitude and depression,²⁶ and conversations taking place in one magazine often spilled over to the other. Female contributors also engaged with men's journals (*mardāna akhbār*) but preferred *zanāna* magazines for discussing intimate issues in a supposedly more 'private' public sphere that belonged to women, as if it were separated by an invisible curtain.

Dress, shame, and 'civilization'

²³ *Tahzīb*, 10, 36, September 7, 1907, 439. A negative reply was given the following week: 10, 37, September 14, 1907, 464.

²⁴ The chick was called *Gūgū*, see *Tahzīb*, 10, 35, August 31, 1907, a chronogram (poem) to mark the death date of *Gūgū* was composed by a correspondent and published a month later: *Tahzīb*, 10, 39, September 28, 1907, 476.

²⁵ Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 127-8.

²⁶ For instance, *Tahzīb*, 8, 7, February 18, 1905, 56.

As in their Bengali counterparts, the significance of shame in both papers is conspicuous. It was described as a positive display of deference and self-restraint and was lauded as women's 'jewel' (*zewan*):²⁷ it was the duty of girls to learn how to demonstrate their shame properly and to the right degree. *Tahzīb* and *Khātūn* did not advocate the forsaking of *purdah* but criticized rigid interpretations of female seclusion and extreme forms of *sharm*.²⁸

The area where feminine shame came to be mainly discussed in *Tahzīb* and *Khātūn* in 1905-1907 was dress: a sustained discussion of twenty-three articles from *Tahzīb* and five lengthy essays in *Khātūn* centered on modesty and dress reform – they form the basis of this article. The lengthy conversation was said to have started with an article by Aziz Fatima Begum on September 3, 1904, a couple of months before the discussion really took off in both magazines.²⁹ The articles were all signed by women's names or initials (often preceded by Mrs./Begum or Miss titles), sometimes under pseudonyms, who contributed from Bombay, Sialkot, Meerut, Moradabad, Hyderabad, Patiala, Bihar, Kamalpur or Quetta.

The debate started with the suggestion of finding one reformed community (*qaum*) dress that responded to the changing needs of the time while still conforming to Islamic codes of modesty. The dress had to be adapted to modern lifestyle (i.e. to the increasing participation of women in public or semi-public spaces like classrooms) and be practical, covering (*satarposhī*), beautiful, and healthy. The question of shame and modesty, designated by the compound word *sharm-o hayā*, quickly became the main point of contention.

Contributors, who unanimously agreed to dress reform, considered Islamic prescriptions and inscribed their endeavor within the popular contemporary rhetoric of 'civilization versus barbarity' which spread in the colonial public sphere since the nineteenth century. When Bint Nasiruddin Hyder insisted that garments should accommodate 'our bashful (*sharmīlī*) nature',

²⁷ *Tahzīb*, 10, 20, May 18, 1907, 241.

²⁸ For instance, it was against *chilla* (isolation after giving birth for instance) and long periods of wearing the *ghunghat* (a specific practice of veiling after marriage).

²⁹ See Mohammed Afzal, 'Gendering the Urdu domestic novel' for the period post-1915.

one ‘*pardanashīn*’ also indicated that they needed to ‘show the glory of Islam’,³⁰ thereby hinting that the refinement of Muslim culture could bridle Western claims to superiority.

Dress was indeed an important aspect of the colonial ‘civilizing mission’. As Charles Darwin noted in 1872, shame ‘is an affair of etiquette, as we clearly see with the nations that go altogether or nearly naked’.³¹ The issue of dress became a crucial topic of discussion during the colonial period – not the least because it was considered by colonial officers an essential element to good health in the tropics –³² but also because of the close association between dress and behavior. The discipline of dress reflected and implied the maintenance of a moral code. Scholars have shown that at the same time as British colonial officers aimed at enhancing their own Britishness through dress, they worked both at documenting and exoticizing Indian ‘folk costumes’ in illustrated albums, and at reforming indigenous ‘indelicate’ practices according to contemporary norms of decency.³³

The diffusion of Victorian morality was accompanied in India by the widespread adoption of the blouse and petticoat by women, and by related phenomena such as the famous ‘breast-cloth controversy’ which transformed social hierarchies in the southern part of the subcontinent.³⁴ As Ju-Ling Lee has argued, in the late nineteenth-century, the Japanese

³⁰ *Khātūn*, 2, 5, May 1905, 194 and *Khātūn*, 3, 9, September 1906, 392.

³¹ Charles Darwin, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1872), 334.

³² Ryan Johnson, ‘European cloth and ‘tropical’ skin: clothing material and British ideas of health and hygiene in tropical climates’, *Bull Hist Med* 83, no. 3 (2009), 530-560.

³³ Kaamya Sharma, ‘The Orientalisation of the Sari’; Helen Callaway, ‘Dressing for Dinner in the Bush: Rituals of Self Definition and British Imperial Authority’ in *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (New York: Berg, 1993), 232-247; Donald Clay Johnson, ‘Clothes make the empire: British dress in India’, in *Dress Sense: Emotional and Sensory Experiences of the Body and Clothes*, ed. D. Clay Johnson and Helen Bradley Foster (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Jayne Shrimpton, ‘Dressing for a tropical climate: the role of native fabrics in fashionable Dress in early colonial India’, *Textile History* 23 (1992), 55-70; Nandi Bhatia, ‘Fashioning Women in Colonial India’, *Fashion Theory* 7, no. 3-4 (2003), 327-344. On dress and morality: Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales: naissance de la consommation XVIIe XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1997); Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

³⁴ Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Sources of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert Hardgrave, ‘The Breast-Cloth Controversy: Caste Consciousness and Social Change in Southern Travancore’, *Indian Economic History Review* 5, no. 2 (1968), 171–87.

government encouraged the abolition of female foot-binding to ‘civilize and modernize’ Taiwanese women’s bodies as much as to include them in the colonial industrial labor force.³⁵ Indian subjects were faced with similar sartorial dilemmas as dress became a ‘pro-rationalist moral measuring concept which establishes the criteria for “civilization”’.³⁶

Although Emma Tarlo has argued that Indian ‘women have been relatively slow to change their dress’,³⁷ female behavior and dress became a topic of public scrutiny that verged on obsession.³⁸ This paved the way for the emergence of ‘sartorial-moral’ projects, in Urdu magazines as in other vernacular periodicals, in which women had a voice. While Himani Bannerji has argued that dress discussions in the Bengali archive only allowed for ‘trade-offs’ to maintain patriarchal agendas and confined women as ‘relegated agents of culture’,³⁹ I argue that the sources that I have examined suggest otherwise. Rather, *Tahzīb* and *Khātūn* enabled women to take a central and active role in imagining collectively concrete and creative solutions to contemporary fashion disasters.

Instead of locating the dress controversy only within the framework of imposed colonial modernity or patriarchy, it is important to note that the conversation in 1905-1907 echoed similar discussions that were taking place in feminist circles in the West and in the Middle East. Since the mid-nineteenth century, dress reform movements in the Global North aimed at producing a more practical dress for progressive and working women. The Bloomer costume, after the name of the American activist for women’s rights who created it, was popularized

³⁵ Ju-Ling Lee, ‘“Civilising” and “Modernising” the Feet: Their Emancipation, Domestication and Aestheticisation in Colonial Taiwan (1895-1945)’, *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2015), 225-260, 234 and 240; Ju-Ling Lee, ‘Clothing the Body, Dressing the Identity: The Case of the Japanese in Taiwan during the Colonial Period’, *Journal of Japanese Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017), 31-64.

³⁶ Himani Bannerji, ‘Attired in Virtue’, 241.

³⁷ Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, 153.

³⁸ Tanika Sarkar, “Hindu conjugality and nationalism in the late nineteenth century Bengal”, *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, National Seminar Papers published by the School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, Calcutta, 1989 quoted in Himani Bannerji, “Textile Prison”, 171. See Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*, 3.

³⁹ Himani Bannerji, ‘Textile Prison’, 190.

from 1851 and was itself inspired by Turkish fashion.⁴⁰ It consisted in loose trousers assorted with a knee-length tunic. In 1905, Khair Unnissa noted in *Tahzīb* that European ladies liked Oriental *pājāmas* (pants) and that Indians consequently fancied wearing them whenever they had the occasion to meet.⁴¹ The dress reform movement gained ground in Europe and the issue was officially discussed at the International Congress for Women's Work and Women's Endeavors in Berlin in 1896.⁴² Soon after, the Club for the Improvement of Women's Clothing was founded, and exhibitions of reformed clothes were held in Berlin from April 1897. Women's conversations in Urdu about dress reform is to be inscribed within a worldwide trend.

Tahzīb and *Khātūn* proposed different methods for reforming women's dress but the first stage entailed to provide an overview of existing styles. *Tahzīb* solicited women to describe their own dress in writing: detailed descriptions with precise measures of tunics and scarves, colors, fabrics, and embroidery techniques were published, creating a rich archive of contemporary fashion with regional varieties and local terminologies. *Khātūn*, on the other hand, proposed to organize an exhibition of clay statues wearing different styles of dress so that women would review them and reach a consensus on which was most appropriate. The idea of the exhibition, which recalls similar enterprises in Europe, was directly inspired by the 1904 Indian National Congress Exhibition in Bombay that offered displays of then very popular clay statues, which had been used as illustrative devices in museums since the mid-nineteenth

⁴⁰ Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality*, 132. See also Onur Inal, 'Women's Fashions in Transition: Ottoman Borderlands and the Anglo-Ottoman exchange of costumes', *Journal of World History* 22, no. 2 (2011), 243-272; Elizabeth B. Frierson, 'Mirrors In, Mirrors Out: Domestication and Rejection of the Foreign in Late-Ottoman Women's Magazines', in *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*, ed. D. Fairchild Ruggles (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), 177-204; Nora Seni, 'La mode et le vêtement féminin dans la presse satirique d'Istanbul à la fin du XIXe siècle', in *Presse turque et presse de Turquie*, ed. Nathalie Clayer, Alexandre Popovic and Thierry Zarcone (Istanbul-Paris: Isis, 1992), 189-209.

⁴¹ *Tahzīb*, 8, 35, September 2, 1905, 364.

⁴² Patricia Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Canterbury: Kent State University Press, 2003), 98.

century.⁴³ The Ladies' section of the Bombay exhibition curated by Rahat Khatun and Mrs Ali Akbar comprised a presentation of different clothing styles, and it was hoped that a similar one be arranged in Aligarh at the same time as the Muhammadan Educational Conference.⁴⁴ While the idea seems to have been unsuccessful, contributors of *Tahzīb* and *Khātūn* soon complained that it was difficult to picture the different styles described and wished for men to arrange for pictures.⁴⁵

Even though the new dress was supposed to reflect progress and Abru Begum, among others, argued for the good influence of the West in helping Indians realize their defects even in sartorial matters, blind imitation of British fashion was unanimously out of the question. As far as English dress was concerned, it was described as ridiculous, uncomfortable, expensive, fast-changing (preparing costly garments that were so soon out of fashion was deemed vain),⁴⁶ and ill-adapted to the climate. High-collar dresses were particularly decried for their unpracticality and painfulness. In one story in *Tahzīb* in May 1906, 'one sick' described the impatience of a young Indian lady dressed in English garments who could not even sit down out of discomfort and was forced to leave the hospital waiting room early because of the inconvenience.⁴⁷ Several contributors also noted that British dress did not conform to Islamic requirements regarding head covering.

Tahzīb and *Khātūn* writers and correspondents otherwise enthusiastically adopted specific elements of European attire: the blouse and petticoat, but also the jacket, waistband,

⁴³ Arthur MacGregor, 'Modelling India. Unfired clay figurines and the East India Company's collections: from devotional icons to didactic displays', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33, no. 3 (2023), 769-786; Jeanette Kokott and Fumi Takayanagi (eds), *Erste Dinge – Rückblick für Ausblick. First Things – Looking back to look forward* (Hamburg: MARKK, 2018), 52; Abigail McGowan, 'An All-Consuming Subject?', 46.

⁴⁴ *Khātūn*, 2, 2-3, February-March 1905, 95. About Rahat Khatun, see A. G. Noorani, *Badruddin Tyabji* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1967).

⁴⁵ *Tahzīb*, 10, 17, April 30, 1907, 210. Yet, there were contemporary British albums picturing Indian dress styles, see Kaamya Sharma, 'The Orientalisation of the Sari', 222.

⁴⁶ *Khātūn*, 4, 4, April 1907, 148.

⁴⁷ *Tahzīb*, 9, 19, May 12, 1906, 219-220.

undergarments, the use of lace, buttons, ribbons, and the odd wristwatch. At the height of the Swadeshi movement, with news of a homegrown ‘banana silk’ manufacture in Nagpur,⁴⁸ some contributors praised the quality of foreign imported fabric. Women were conscious of European taste and seem to have partly adjusted their own preferences accordingly. Reports of Indian ladies dazzling their British peers with their magnificent outfits at London parties encouraged readers to cling to Indian, albeit accommodated, styles.⁴⁹ The authors reported a common preference for softer pastel color tones (light pink, white, turquoise), for matching upper and lower garments, and for a lesser use of jewelry, which might have been influenced by, or simply concurred with, Western fashion. Indian ladies also shared an obsession with cleanliness. Although increasingly cosmopolitan, female contributors nevertheless made a point about not wanting to become Anglicized.

Besides British fashion, Arab and Turkish fashion was also discussed. A.W.J. Begum found Arab dress ugly (‘a big bag would also do the job’)⁵⁰ but Turkish clothes were usually appreciated – they looked like English clothes with minor adaptations (e.g., head covering).⁵¹ However, like British garments, they were concertedly decried as unaffordable. Adopting a completely different dress would incur too many expenses for the household, which women managed carefully. As Bint Nasiruddin Hyder concluded, ‘once we will be able to sew, we will adopt the Turkish dress’.⁵²

As the series showed, while advertisements for sewing machines started to appear in *Tahzīb* in July 1906 and social reformers encouraged women to learn to stitch since the late nineteenth century, upper- and middle-class women generally relied on servants (*mughlānī*) and especially local tailors (*darzī*) for preparing their garments, except for some embroidery and

⁴⁸ *Tahzīb*, 9, 32, August 11, 1906, title page (news section).

⁴⁹ *Tahzīb*, 8, 24, June 17, 1905, 227.

⁵⁰ *Khātūn*, 2, 2-3, February-March 1905, 97.

⁵¹ *Khātūn*, 2, 7, July 1905, 312.

⁵² *Khātūn*, 2, 5, May 1905, 196.

repair work.⁵³ As Amanda Lanzillo has recently highlighted, colonial educational administrators increasingly encouraged the craft of sewing among Indian women and female writers like Shabihunnisa provided her peers with training manuals like *Muft kā darzī* ('The free tailor') in 1907, but they hardly competed with male tailors.⁵⁴

By 1916, less than one percent of households possessed a Singer (the then most popular sewing machine) and, until late, tailoring was considered in India to be men's work.⁵⁵ The number of professional tailors, in fact, rose exponentially between 1901 and 1911, certainly because of increased demand for new styles partly due to the public appearance of a growing number of women.⁵⁶ In 1906, the marketing strategy for the reformed dress outlined by one 'pardanashīn' included the establishment of *Zenana Clothes Stores* and the dissemination of pictures for accurate reproduction by local tailors, not the commercialization of sewing patterns for women to reproduce.⁵⁷ Foreign fashion being too costly, contributors rapidly turned toward the amendment of Indian styles instead.

Indian dress reform and modesty

Early in the series, in April 1905, Abru Begum criticized traditional Indian styles and rather praised Arab clothes, which 'smell[ed] the scent of culture and [we]re remarkable for their simplicity'.⁵⁸ Interestingly, while traditional Indian garments were described as meeting most requirements (i.e., adapted to the climate and beautiful), they also supposedly lacked in

⁵³ In 1866, J. Forbes Watson noted that "embroidery form[ed] the leisure occupation of the majority of females of poor Mahomedan families in town." J. Forbes Watson, *The Textile Manufactures of the People of India* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1866), 117.

⁵⁴ Amanda Lanzillo, *Pious Labor: Islam, Artisanry, and Technology in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024), 74-86.

⁵⁵ David Arnold, 'Global goods and local usages: The small world of the Indian sewing machine, 1875–1952', *Journal of Global History* 6, no. 3 (2011), 407-429, 413.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁵⁷ *Khātūn*, 3, 9, September 1906, 393.

⁵⁸ *Tahzīb*, 8, 16, April 22, 1905, 132.

modesty: if strict customary female seclusion was to be relaxed, traditional clothes had to be reformed.

Abru Begum condemned the use of both the north Indian pants-tunic-*dupaṭṭa* style, and saris. She wrote, and many contributors agreed in the next issues, that the former implied having to gather up the wide-leg pants (*dhīle pājāme*) when getting on and off carriages, with the risk of showing the legs.⁵⁹ A short tunic (*kurtī*) showed too much skin, and the thin scarf (*dupaṭṭa*) used to cover the chest and head threatened to fly off at the slightest gush of wind. Saris were not better: they exposed too much of the body.⁶⁰ Bint Nasiruddin Hyder agreed that ‘Mughal clothes have nothing to protect modesty except for a flimsy *dupaṭṭa*’,⁶¹ and Har Devi, a Hindu editor from Lahore, acquiesced that although in fashion saris did not meet purdah requirements.⁶² The criticism led to bitter comments in the following issues and Abru Begum became the subject of bullying – she was said to have dishonored (*be-ābrū*, a pun with her name) her ancestors, which led her to defend herself in two subsequent issues. The dispute was often interrupted by injunctions from the editors to remain tolerant and respectful of each other’s practices and opinions.

After this criticism of traditional styles, columnists like Sh.N. from Bombay argued that the clothes that were usually worn at noble households in north India did not display immodesty in any way since, after all, women stayed inside their quarters with no foreigner (*nā-mahram*) allowed and with their male relatives coughing before entering to leave them time to adjust their dress. In such circumstances, who cared about a bit of leg showing? The institution of purdah was enough to safeguard female honor. Abru Begum responded that her interlocutor respected purdah alright, but confused modesty with the device to protect it: while conforming to purdah

⁵⁹ Fitted pants (*tang pājāme*) were better, but too tight (for instance the Hyderabad style) they revealed the shape of the leg which was also deemed inappropriate by some.

⁶⁰ *Tahzīb*, 8, 16, April 22, 1905, 121.

⁶¹ *Khātūn*, 2, 5, May 1905, 195.

⁶² *Tahzīb*, 9, 19, May 12, 1906, 224.

practices, she sat at home in her immodest clothes, even in front of her own brothers and sisters. Had she no shame at all?⁶³ According to Abru Begum, the code of purdah needed to be followed through even inside the home. If, as the title of her article went, ‘Clothes: Modesty is half of the Faith’, Sh.N. was doing the exact reverse of what she was promoting. She needed to learn to practice *sharm* properly. This was quite a turnaround: it was not Abru Begum who was dishonored by her Arab dress, but her conservative correspondent sitting within her four walls with her see-through veil. This critique recalls a famous anecdote about the finesse of purdah outfits: one day, Mughal emperor Aurangzeb scolded his daughter for walking around naked in the palace, to which she retorted that she was wearing seven layers of *āb-e rawān* (very thin) muslin.⁶⁴

The significance of fabric

As scholars have indeed highlighted, cloth is of high significance in South Asian society. It has a major role in political and religious rituals, and it is believed to have transformative value: the quality and purity of fabric inscribing itself directly onto its wearer.⁶⁵ This observation calls for a more attentive look at the interactions and new connections between women and the materiality of dress, and at what was being created in the process. As they were faced with increasing opportunities to appear outside of their homes, in classrooms, in their travels, or in the cosmopolitan parties that they were now expected to attend with their husbands, how did early twentieth-century women work with the new constraints brought by the fabric of their traditional dress?

As Bruno Latour encouraged in his Actor-Network Theory, following actors as they are forced to establish new associations help us grasp the concrete ways in which the social is

⁶³ *Tahzīb*, 8, 47, November 25, 1905, 507.

⁶⁴ William Bolts, *Considerations on Indian affairs* quoted in John Forbes Watson, *The Textile Manufactures*, 76.

⁶⁵ Christopher Bayly, ‘The origins of swadeshi (home industry)’, 286-290.

created – the social itself being conceived as a ‘particular movement of reassociation or reassembling’ in which non-human actors also have a part to play.⁶⁶ Not that non-human actors act in complete symmetry with human actors, but, as mediators, they impact and shape human action.

Fabric was indeed a topic of discussion as women described their clothes in much detail. They showed a great knowledge of different types of textile and decorative styles and techniques, which is hardly surprising given the importance of cloth in lifecycle and everyday rituals. The fabrics that were most frequently mentioned were usually silk and cotton, although velvet and Kashmiri wool were at times cited. Usually, silk was said to be used for special occasions and cotton for everyday usage, but the variety of cotton, silk, and mixed silk-cotton cloth was remarkable: contributors mentioned both imported and native (notably *ḍoryā* or *kamkḥwāb*) silk, muslin, *sūsī*, *mashrū*, *nainsukh* (Nainsook), *āb-e rawān* or *gulbadan*. The use of silk for female clothing was in line with traditional gendered Islamic fashion since men were not generally allowed to wear it,⁶⁷ and cotton was in fashion too, although it was usually more valued for its moral properties in Islam than Hinduism.⁶⁸

If we look at how *Tahzīb* and *Kḥātūn* contributors described the cloth that they were wearing, they usually characterized it as very thin (*mahīn*, *karīb*). As Mumtaz Jahan Begum explained in October 1905, women used finer fabrics at her in-laws’ in Surat, Gujarat, where purdah was practiced more than in Bombay, therefore directly linking the practice of purdah with the resort to lighter weight material.⁶⁹ When purdah was less strict, thicker fabrics were

⁶⁶ Bruno Latour, *Changer de société, refaire de la sociologie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007), 14.

⁶⁷ Hadas Hirsch, ‘Circulation of fashions: Deciphering foreign influences on the creation of Muslim Clothing in early Islam’, *Hamsa* 7 (2021), 20. About the interdiction of wearing silk for Muslim men, see Christopher Bayly, ‘The origins of swadeshi (home industry): cloth and Indian society, 1700-1930’, in *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 285-321, 290.

⁶⁸ See Hadas Hirsch, ‘Circulation of fashions’, and Christopher Bayly, ‘The origins of swadeshi (home industry)’, 289 and 290.

⁶⁹ *Tahzīb*, 8, 40, October 7, 1905, 426.

usually worn. While sometimes discussing the relaxation of purdah practices in the series, women seemingly never considered the necessity of discarding finer material: after all, the use of thin fabric was prized and it also concurred with contemporary Western fashion.⁷⁰ If *ashrāf* women clung to their expensive and fine fabrics but let go in part of the practice of seclusion, some solution still needed to be found. Underwear was recommended to overcome partly the issue of see-through textile. The way the material clung to the body, however, was a worry: thin muslin *dupattas* and saris hardly remained in place and demanded constant readjustment.

When Fatima Muhammadi therefore described the ‘most appropriate dress’ in *Khātūn* in 1907, she preferred either a long tunic (*kurtā*), reasonably fitted trousers at the ankles, and a *dupatta* fixed on the head and shoulders with safety pins, or a sari or *lahngā* (skirt) with under pants and with the loose end of the garment well secured with safety pins.⁷¹ One of the easiest, cheapest, and readymade solutions to dress reform was the safety pin. Bint Nasiruddin Hyder, Mumtaz Jahan Begum, Abru Begum, Abbasi Begum and Fatima Muhammadi all advised the use of the device, which was in use among ‘our dear educated sisters... to go around with ease’.⁷² The safety pin prevented the part of the scarf or sari that covered the head from falling. But it could also easily adjust the legs of trousers to cling the ankles as required. It was a new tool for the practice of female *sharm* in public.

Safety pins and the delegation of morality

The safety pin was a relatively new commodity. It was patented in 1849 by Walter Hunt in the United States and attained swift popularity, which was facilitated by the mechanization of its manufacture in the second half of the nineteenth century and the subsequent decrease in

⁷⁰ See Douglas Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism*, 112; Abigail McGowan, ‘An All-Consuming Subject?’, 34.

⁷¹ *Khātūn*, 4, 4, April 1907, 148-149.

⁷² *Tahzīb*, 8, 46, November 18, 1905, 499 (Abru Begum); *Khātūn*, 2, 5, May 1905 (Bint Nasiruddin Hyder); *Tahzīb*, 8, 40, October 7, 1905 (Mumtaz Jahan Begum); *Tahzīb*, 9, 29, July 21, 1906 (Abbasi Begum); *Khātūn*, 4, 4, April 1907 (Fatima Muhammadi).

production costs.⁷³ The *Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore) for the period from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century shows a peak of occurrences for ‘safety pin’ in the first decade of the twentieth century. There were 413 occurrences for the period 1900-1909 against 212 in 1890-1899 and 270 in 1910-1919.⁷⁴ Mentions of safety pins started getting more frequent in the late 1870s-1880s as imported goods: common brass or steel safety pins were usually manufactured in Birmingham – although counterfeit German pins also made it to British India – and sold through local outlets.⁷⁵

Safety pins were initially called ‘infants’ safety pins’ and used by nannies and nurses. In the late 1880s, an ‘elegant’ metal pin case fitted with safety pins for use in nurseries sold at Rs. 1.⁷⁶ As time went by, advertisements for safety pins started targeting expats and Anglo-Indian ladies, and anecdotes describing dress disasters were interrupted by interjections like ‘what would I not give for a safety pin’!⁷⁷ As Anna Miller has noted, the use of the safety pin was then widespread in England as lighter weight fabrics were preferred.⁷⁸ Safety pins were treated as haberdashery like buttons or other such furniture which sold in annas (a fraction of a rupee).

From 1886 at least, advertisements for ‘fashionable’ safety pins in costly metals like silver or gold appeared on the last pages of the Lahore paper: they were included in jewelry catalogues. In British India as in the metropole, they were offered as wedding, baptism or Christmas gifts, or as prizes in competition, and soon became an accessory in English male

⁷³ See Marcel Moussette, ‘L’épingle et son double en Nouvelle-France’, *Les Cahiers des Dix* 60 (2006), 103-128; Henry Petroski, *The Evolution of Useful Things: How Everyday Artifacts – From Forks and Pins to Paper Clips and Zippers – Came to be as they are* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 57.

⁷⁴ For searching the *Civil and Military Gazette* of Lahore, I used the online *British Newspapers Archive*.

⁷⁵ For instance, *Civil and Military Gazette*, September 18, 1901, 3; December 15, 1885, 16.

⁷⁶ *Civil and Military Gazette*, July 6, 1888, 9.

⁷⁷ *Civil and Military Gazette*, February 6, 1893, 2.

⁷⁸ Anna M. Miller, *Illustrated Guide to Jewelry Appraising: Antique, Period, and Modern* (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1990), 46.

fashion too, as collars shortened and fancy cravats made their apparition.⁷⁹ Although the use of the safety pin as a luxury item certainly contributed to enhance the economic status of the wearer – Abbasi Begum and Mumtaz Jahan Begum emphasized the ‘beauty’ of the safety pin used (*k̄hubsūrat*; *k̄hushnumā*)⁸⁰ – I do not intend to focus here on the money value of the pin, but on its meanings and on what it enabled in terms of sartorial practices of shame and modesty.

Did the use of safety pins impact the practice of *sharm*? I argue that it certainly did. Women who adopted it no longer needed to be constantly on guard about their slipping veils as they moved through public spaces. As ‘emotions are something we *do*’, habituated and automatically executed movements of the body ‘molded’ the body.⁸¹ The learned gesture of readjusting the veil forced a certain practice of modesty that somewhat compares to the wearing of anklets (*uli*) by Southeastern Nigerian women. As Sarah Adams has emphasized, *uli* ‘informed bodily behavior’ to such an extent that even women who could not afford the anklets ‘nonetheless walked in a way that suggested they were accustomed to wearing them’.⁸² This is a formidable example of how an object – even in absence – impacts human action. What if some gestures were no longer required thanks to the use of safety pins: did *sharm* disappear?

Quite the contrary. I argue that the pin rather acted in what Bruno Latour has called the ‘delegation of morality’. Female modesty did not decrease, but its practice could radically transform. In attempts at grasping how technologies shape our daily lives, Bruno Latour has explored the role of diverse artifacts in disciplining human behavior, as human actors delegate morality to non-humans. Instead of considering this resort to technology as a loss of morality, Latour proposes a ‘socio-technique’ hypothesis according to which the ‘mass of morality’

⁷⁹ For instance, *Civil and Military Gazette*, September 22, 1896, 4. About safety pins and male fashion, see *Civil and Military Gazette*, April 21, 1907, 7. About jewelry in Urdu women’s magazines, see Melina Gravier, ‘Voix de femmes, Bijoux du quotidien: Economie, religion et droit de propriété dans la presse féminine indienne (1929-1956)’, PhD. Diss., University of Lausanne, forthcoming.

⁸⁰ *Tahzīb*, 8, 40, October 7, 1905, 427 and *Tahzīb*, 9, 29, July 21, 1906, 341.

⁸¹ Monique Scheer, ‘Are Emotions a kind of Practice?’, 194, 200-201.

⁸² Sarah Adams, ‘Performing Dress and Adornment in Southeastern Nigeria’, 119.

remains constant but is reorganized: one part is allocated to the human actor and one to the moral technology.⁸³ In this instance, we can indeed say that some women delegated the action of making sure that their veil was in place to the safety pin. While in some cases the delegation to non-human actors raises the question of human autonomy, this does not apply to devices like the safety pin: the wearer intentionally chooses to utilize it and therefore still possesses the ‘supreme’ agency of delegating morality.⁸⁴ Shame could no longer consist of the gesture of readjusting one’s veil, but of securing one’s safety pin, as one gesture compensated another.⁸⁵

The safety pin yet created controversy for moralist critiques who decried the loss of morality and of traditional practices of female modesty. In 1932, for instance, a critique was voiced in the popular ladies’ magazine from Lahore, *Sahelī* (‘Girlfriend’). Sayyid Abdul Samad Saba then criticized the technology for inciting behaviors that supposedly went against the moral norms integrated into the device itself. Promoting female seclusion and traditional gender roles, he denounced safety pins as technologies which both indicated moral decline and *facilitated* men-women interactions by diminishing the need to practice the traditional self-conscious gestures of *sharm*:

“They [women] travel in the company of men, but the problem is that they constantly need to rearrange their veil with the hands. For this reason, they consider that securing a safety pin is of the highest refinement. Allah, Allah! What a sign of contempt for one’s own community, what a violation of our morality (*burā akhlāqī naqs*)!”⁸⁶

⁸³ Bruno Latour, ‘La ceinture de sécurité’, *Alliage : Culture – Science – Technique* 1 (1989), 21-27, 24 ; Bruno Latour, ‘Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts’, in Johnson, Deborah J., and Jameson M Wetmore, eds. *Technology and Society, Building Our Sociotechnical Future* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008), 151-180.

⁸⁴ Bruno Latour, ‘Morality and Technology: The End of the Means’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, no. 5-6 (2002), 247-260; Jos de Mul, ‘Des machines morales’, *Cités* 39, no. 3 (2009), 27-38.

⁸⁵ In another context, Megan Adamson Sijapati and Tina Harris have explored the shifting practices around Nepali Hindu *pote* (a beaded necklace worn by women after marriage), highlighting that urban generations sometimes used a beaded safety pin instead of the ‘inconvenient’ necklace, thus producing new ‘embodied spaces of belief’. Megan Adamson Sijapati and Tina Harris, ‘From Heavy Beads to Safety Pins: Adornment and Religiosity in Hindu Women’s *Pote* Practices’, *Material Religion* 12, no. 1 (2016), 1-25, 17.

⁸⁶ *Sahelī* (Lahore), May 10, 1932, 27. I consulted the magazine at Abdul Majeed Khokhar Yadgar Library.

In this view, by providing more comfort in the practice of modesty, the safety pin seemed to enable ‘immodest’ behaviors (mingling with the opposite sex), thereby going against the principles that the device was supposed to safeguard in the first place. In a way, the technology risked perverting the initial intention behind its use. This relates to the critique that Abru Begum formulated to Sh.N. when she accused the latter of sitting immodestly inside her own house: morality and shame were to be practiced regardless of the constraints or of the liberties that women were given. Purdah did not guarantee morality more than the safety pin. But if the injunction was that women be veiled, the safety pin ensured that it be rigidly the case.

Indeed, despite the critique, I argue that the safety pin *forced* modesty. Securely fastened in the *dupatta*, it no longer allowed for playful manipulation of the veil, a still popular *topos* of Bollywood movies. As Latour argues, non-human actors are not mere intermediaries of human action, they play an active role in *determining* and *constraining* human action too. They act as moral technologies: they *force* human to do things like a road bumper forces a driver to slow down.⁸⁷ The object itself compelled the user to behave morally by the constraints it brought. Therefore, while the safety pin allowed women to walk carefree of the trouble of adjusting their dress, it also removed some of the flexibility of shame practices. Lila Abu-Lughod has argued that in Bedouin society ‘a woman’s veil can be manipulated to indicate degree of social discomfort’⁸⁸ and among Hindu women ‘doing *lajjā*’, the veil can also be lowered or lifted in an instant according to context.⁸⁹ This is no longer the case with the safety pin as a moral order is imposed on its wearer at all times.

⁸⁷ Bruno Latour, ‘Where Are the Missing Masses?’, 157. For Latour, the sum of morality increases with the ‘population of non-humans’. As he provocatively concludes elsewhere, in technological societies, we are no less moral than previously, on the contrary we are possibly more so, and this is exactly why technology was implemented. Bruno Latour, ‘La ceinture de sécurité’, 27.

⁸⁸ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honour and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2000), 127.

⁸⁹ See Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, 160; Laurence Lécuyer, *Le ghunghat dévoilé. Voile, corps et société en Inde du Nord* (Paris: Geuthner, 2021).

How did the delegation of morality to the safety pin alter the practice of shame then? I argue that technology allowed women to move with greater ease, but not shame-free. Instead of diminishing modesty and morality, the use of the safety pin allowed for their reinforcement, as women were invited to dress modestly even inside the house. The delegation to the safety pin perhaps even further enabled women to invest in other modest behaviors. In the magazines, women were far from being encouraged to enjoy their new conditions mindlessly: morality was a constant matter of discussion as individuals were constantly prompted to self-improve and act with dignity on all occasions. In *Tahzīb*, for instance, education as shown through deportment and language was a site for gauging one's respectability and for *sharm* to occur and be practiced. If women delegated part of their sartorial modesty, they would then be able to give more attention to increased self-control, like polishing their meeting etiquette:

If we do not want our interlocutor to think bad of us, we need to correct our way of speaking. When we go to functions, we dress well to look good to others. I went to a function where there was a gorgeous and beautifully dressed lady, but then she spoke with such bad words (*tū tū, main main*, etc.) that the other ladies had to shut their ears.⁹⁰

Upper- and middle-class women were frequently shamed for their language manners in *Tahzīb*: talking loudly and gesturing while speaking; using improper words; or being unaware of how to greet according to rank.⁹¹ Since women were increasingly participating in mundane events, manners and education became yardsticks in the evaluation of their status in British India. If anything, female readers were exhorted to growing self-attention, and to feel and practice *sharm* more deeply, even within the four walls of their homes, which were, more and more, scrutinized in the open.

A 'Muslim' technology? Contouring collective identity through dress

⁹⁰ *Tahzīb*, vol. 9, n°19, 12 May 1906, 216.

⁹¹ For instance, *Tahzīb*, 9, 19, May 12, 1906, 216; *Tahzīb*, 10, 14, April 6, 1907, 172; *Tahzīb*, 10, 15, April 13, 1907, 187.

The safety pin enabled new practices and new controversies. Although it came from the West, and was hence a foreign commodity, its capacity to act as a moral technology that safeguarded the tenets of (Islamic) modesty meant that it assumed a particular significance. As scholars have noted, globalized objects are not just simply adopted locally but also redefined.⁹² Commodities do not assume a universal value but are adapted and assimilated into ‘native’ goods – globalization being thereby understood not as a homogenizing process but as a localizing one.⁹³ Since the issue that triggered the whole conversation in the magazines revolved around the idea of one ‘community dress’, did the safety pin play a role in shaping collective identity in India? Could the safety pin become a Muslim technology, as Megan Robb or Amanda Lanzillo have respectively argued for Urdu lithography and the railway?⁹⁴

While entanglements between technical and religious practices have been emphasized by scholars of religious studies who consider that belief is enabled and lived through practices and materiality,⁹⁵ I suggest that the dress controversy highlights complex processes at play, which prevents a quick identification of the safety pin as a Muslim technology. For some women, the safety pin was certainly a technology that acted in what they identified as a religious practice of modesty. For others, like Sayyid Abdul Samad Saba, it rather went *against* what was promoted as correct Islamic practice and therefore acted as an *immoral* technology.

Modesty was far from limited to Muslims exclusively: non-Muslim ladies also practiced purdah – and contributed to the discussion about the materiality of dress. Many correspondents emphasized custom and tradition (*rusūm-o riwāj*) or culture (*tahzīb*) over religion when it came

⁹² See Igor Kopytoff, ‘The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process’, in *The social life of things*, 64-91, 67.

⁹³ David Arnold, ‘Global goods and local usages’, 407, 409; Christopher Bayly, ‘The origins of swadeshi (home industry)’.

⁹⁴ Megan Eaton Robb, *Print and the Urdu Public: Muslims, Newspapers, and Urban Life in Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), chapter 3, and Amanda Lanzillo, *Pious Labour*, chapter 6.

⁹⁵ See for instance, Daniel Miller, *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) or David Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture: the matter of belief* (London: Routledge, 2010).

to *sharm* practices. The safety pin was used by Indian women of all religions, and not necessarily by all Muslims. While some contributors highlighted the democratic reach of Islam and of the dress reform enterprise, others showed reluctance to address Muslim women as a homogeneous lot.

The active role of dress in religious practice was noted by contributors and became a source of worry for some. This was particularly visible in relation to saris/skirts (*lahngā*) and on whether there were Sharia-approved clothes. In the beginning of the twentieth century, what was often called the ‘Parsi dress’ – a sari associated with an upper-garment and a jacket – was in fashion and spreading among ‘modern’ women across British India. It was proposed as a suitable reformed dress for Muslim women. Bombay Begums like Rahat Khatun approved its usage,⁹⁶ but conservative north Indian contributors disapproved of it. The problem, this time, was not that it was immodest, but against religion: as ‘one sister’ claimed in *Tahzīb*, those clothes were un-Islamic and praying (*namāz*) while wearing them was forbidden in Islam.⁹⁷

As the actant role of dress and its impact on human action was recognized, the clothes which supposedly prevented religious practice were to be avoided. The fact that the sari or skirt does not provide separation between the legs meant for some that performing the Islamic daily prayers (which require a good amount of bowing and prostrating) could be embarrassing and potentially hindered.⁹⁸ If saris prevented the performance of such a core practice of Islam, they could threaten individual and communal identity. In the famous 1888 Urdu novel *Ibn ul-Waqt*, Nazir Ahmad strikingly related how the protagonist adopted British clothes, convinced that he would be able to distinguish dress and behavior. After some time, however, the ill-suited clothes prevented him from performing his daily prayers and his religious ideas started to change to the

⁹⁶ *Tahzīb*, 8,21, May 27, 1905.

⁹⁷ *Tahzīb*, 8, 27, July 8, 1905, 305-307.

⁹⁸ The wearing of unstitched clothes like saris is also considered ‘permanently pure’ in Hindu traditions and is hence worn for Hindu rituals, see for instance O. P. Joshi, “Continuity and change in Hindu women’s dress”, in *Dress and Gender*, 214-231, 217.

extent that his community considered him the founder of a new sect.⁹⁹ This echoed the fear of moralist critiques who saw collective morals crumbling under the weight of a safety pin.

Fatima Muhammadi argued that clothing ‘is a sign of community belonging’ (*qaumiyat kī nishānī hai*),¹⁰⁰ a community which had strong religious undertones.¹⁰¹ Adopting ‘non-Muslim’ practices was increasingly described as against Islam – incidentally, differences in practice between Shias and Sunnis for instance were not mentioned in the series. Conservative Muslim reformers from the Deoband seminary particularly warned their coreligionists against the ‘imitation of the unbelievers’ (*tashabbu bi’l kuffār*) and issued fatwas banning Indian Muslims from wearing ‘Hindu’ and English dress.¹⁰² Ashraf Ali Thanawi, the Deobandi leader who published the hugely popular manual for women *Bahishtī Zewar* (‘Heavenly Ornaments’) at the beginning of the twentieth century, condemned the use of clothes that were ‘characteristic’ of other communities in India: it ‘compromised public distinctions between Muslims and others’.¹⁰³ This mirrored the contemporary movement which conflated ideas of conformist religious orthodoxy with the formation of a separate pan-Indian Muslim political community, and which superficially obscured internal diversity among Muslim communities.¹⁰⁴ What was correct Islamic practice, however, was not as straightforward.

A couple of contributors complicated the picture. They insisted that saris also disclosed social status: they were associated with lower class groups. In July 1905, ‘a sister’ claimed that, among north Indian Muslim women, saris were worn by new converts of low status (butchers,

⁹⁹ Margrit Pernau, ‘Shifting Globalities – Changing Headgear: The Indian Muslims between Turban, Hat and Fez’, in *Translocality. The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective*, ed. Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 249-267, 263.

¹⁰⁰ *Khātūn*, 2, 5, May 1905, p. 194.

¹⁰¹ She opposed English and Indian clothes, explaining that the differences between them should be the same as between Christianity and Islam.

¹⁰² Brannon D. Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 102-103.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁰⁴ See for instance Syed Akbar Zaidi, *Making a Muslim: reading publics and contesting identities in nineteenth-century North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

weavers, vegetable sellers, cooks, etc.). They had ('not yet') adopted the usages – and religious practices – of higher classes and were therefore easily recognisable.¹⁰⁵ Gh.J. Begum also remarked 'I also had a great desire of wearing *lahngās*, but when I saw the style of those hospital nurses and wetnurses, I grew a dislike (*nafrat*)¹⁰⁶ and completely discarded them'. Whichever dress would be eventually chosen, she continued, 'should be the style preferred by the upper classes' not the other way around.¹⁰⁷ The materiality of the sari might relate to the supposedly Hinduized indigenous beliefs which orthodox reformist Muslims tried to eradicate among their peers at the time.

This point of view was met with criticism in the magazines as correspondents opposed the idea that dress was a matter of religious identity or class but rather aligned with personal taste, regional styles, and local purdah practices. Modernist writers like Muhammadi Begum disagreed with the idea that saris were prohibited for prayer and wrote that she had never read anything about such a taboo.¹⁰⁸ Abru Begum reminded that Arab men and women traditionally wore long robes in Mecca and that the Prophet himself used to wear Zoroastrian clothes,¹⁰⁹ and Mumtaz Jahan Begum explained that clothing varied even within one family. The pants-tunic-*dupatta* style was worn at her in-laws and the sari at hers. As she explained, neither she nor her husband liked her in-laws' style and she thus continued wearing the sari after marriage.¹¹⁰ Other curious correspondents simply revealed that they did not understand why saris would be forbidden for prayer.¹¹¹ Sayyid Mumtaz Ali reminded readers that 'respectable' Muslim women

¹⁰⁵ *Tahzīb*, 8, 27, July 8, 1905, 306.

¹⁰⁶ About disgust and hierarchies in colonial South Asia, see Joel Lee, 'Disgust and untouchability: towards an affective theory of caste', *South Asian History and Culture*, 12, no.2-3 (2021), 310-327 and Layli Uddin, 'Casteist demons and working-class prophets, subaltern Islam in Bengal, circa 1872-1928', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 33, no.4 (2023), 1051-1075.

¹⁰⁷ *Tahzīb*, 8, 37, September 16, 1905, 387.

¹⁰⁸ *Tahzīb*, 8, 27, July 8, 1905, 307.

¹⁰⁹ *Tahzīb*, 8, 47, November 25, 1905, 507.

¹¹⁰ *Tahzīb*, 8, 40, October 7, 1905, 426.

¹¹¹ *Tahzīb*, 8, 34, August 26, 1905, 353.

traditionally wore saris in some regions – particularly in the Deccan, but also in Shahpur or Jhang.¹¹²

The controversy in *zanāna* magazines in fact demonstrated the impact of dress on human action and on the reconfiguration of social groups. The texture of cloth, its finesse, the way it clung to the body or threatened to fall off one’s head (or not), impacted the culture (*tahzīb*) of modesty and introduced discussions over who exactly should practice it, as the question of what it signified to be Muslim hovered over most conversations. The safety pin was then not described as a ‘Muslim’ technology, but it could well become so.

Conclusion

Focusing on one controversy on dress reform occurring in 1905-1907 in two popular Urdu magazines for women, I have argued for the significant association between women and the materiality of their clothes. Women showed agency in debating over clothing styles, fabric, and the issue of community dress, and interacted with new technologies like the safety pin.

A new Western commodity, the safety pin created controversy as it acted in the delegation of morality at the time when *ashrāf* women increasingly stepped into the public sphere. Instead of being a tool responsible for a loss of morality, I suggest that the safety pin enabled a displacement of shame practices. As a non-mandatory (and inexpensive) item of clothing, women could decide to use it or not. If they did, they accepted that the device removed some of the flexibility of traditional *sharm* practices that enabled the lowering or lifting of their veil according to context: the pin forced modest behavior. By overcoming some of the constraints of their dress, they were called to turn their attention to other self-control practices like demonstrating polite and educated behavior in society.

¹¹² *Tahzīb*, 8, 32, August 12, 1905, 326.

More broadly, the discussion on dress reform in the magazines highlighted two simultaneous processes taking place in the colonial world. Firstly, the boundaries between private and public spheres started blurring as women stepped into the new liminary environments of *zanāna* magazines, parties, or women-only carriages. Secluded Urdu-speaking women took their pens to describe and debate with the reading public what was yet still private: the ways of clothing their hidden bodies and styling their concealed hair. With attention to what they were doing and how they were moving in the open also came complementary attention to what was happening inside their homes. Their sartorial modesty was not only expected to be preserved in public, but also, increasingly, in private too.

Secondly, the dress controversy revealed an interaction between women and the materiality of their clothes which allowed for a profound discussion on modesty and community identities. The sari became a particular topic of disagreement: some contributors dismissed it as the dress of Hindus or lower-class Muslims, while others vehemently contradicted this view.¹¹³ Although initially taking part in a project of creating a pan-Indian politico-religious community through dress, the 1905-1907 series showed that Muslim community identity was unstable, and that Urdu-speaking women did have agency in choosing their garments, adhered to different *sharm* practices, and sometimes resisted the project of uniformization. In this debate on female shame, the safety pin created controversy over what it meant and implied to be Muslim in British India.

¹¹³ Elisabetta Iob has argued that when a Pakistani ‘national dress’ was discussed in the 1950s-60s, the sari was discarded as emblematic of neighboring, and rival, India. Elisabetta Iob, ‘Wilful daughters, domestic goddesses, pious Muslims, and rebels: Islam, fashion, commodities, and emotions among upper-class women in Pakistan, 1947-1962’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2023, 1-19.