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Caught in A Cultural Flux: Immigrant Muslim Women in Farhana Sheikh's *The Red Box*

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As an epistemological category of analysis, diaspora cannot remain separated and distinct from the intersectionality of class, race, gender and sexuality (Farahani 118). In considering the diasporic experience of Muslim women, which constitutes the major thematic concerns of fictional works written particularly since the last decade of the 20th century, religion emerges as another significant co-ordinate alongwith class, race, gender and sexuality. This paper examines how in Farhana Sheikh's *The Red Box* the Pakistani immigrants in England negotiate their religious identity and accommodate to or feel constrained by visible Islamic symbols like the purdah (veil).

Farhana Sheikh's *The Red Box* charts the identity travails of three sets of Pakistani women in England belonging to two generations – Raisa, Tahira and Nasreen and their mothers Sabah Ahmed, Nargis Rashid and BulquisEhsan. Raisa is a teacher engaged in a research project about the identity and value systems of British Muslim immigrant women –how they live, how they have become who they are, what they think is important, what they suffer and how they fight back. During the course of her research Raisa finds herself drawn into the lives of her 'subjects', Tahira and Nasreen, fifteen-year-old students. Raisa's research is less an academic exercise than an exploration of her own identity – a single, wealthy woman whose independence and upper class status mark her off from her working class 'subjects'. Raisa, who was seven, when she left her home in Lahore for London, in 1961, has now turned thirty-one. So the year is 1985.

Symbols of Islamic identity, the purdah for example, assume particular significance for a Muslim community residing in an alien environment. The contours of the purdah in *The Red Box* are to be outlined in the light of the immigrant status of its Muslim women characters. While the first-generation women create their own cultural space and guard it zealously against the onslaughts of the host culture, their daughters find themselves increasingly caught between the conflicting pulls and drives of their parent and host cultures. An accommodation to the purdah – deference to the family, conformity to tradition and the emphasis on sexual morality and sex segregation being its implicit features – is an ideal enshrined in their parent culture. The pressure to conform to the ideal is greater on the woman, who is regarded as the repository of the Islamic tradition and the transmitter of its values.

The journey undertaken by the first-generation women in *The Red Box* is from the closed Muslim society of Pakistan to the freedom (though largely illusory) of the West. Consequently, there is a broadening of the physical and mental spaces for them and their daughters. All the mothers participate in the labour force, though it is out of compulsion rather than as a matter of choice. The importance of education is stressed in all the three families. Raisa's father always upheld the pursuit of knowledge as the Islamic ideal. "Seek knowledge, though it be at the ends of the earth". These had been the Prophet's sentiments [...]" (RB 83). Nargis Rashid, who had to drop her studies early, wants her "children to study, pass exams and learn things [...]" (RB 144). Nasreen's parents also attach much significance to the education of their children. In fact, as Tahira's mother puts it, the poorer they are, the more important