



UNVEILING THE PURDAH: IMTIAZ DHARKER'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

A multi-faceted personality diasporic Muslim poet, a documentary film maker and a painter. Referring to herself as a Scottish Muslim. Calvinist her mixed heritage and itinerant lifestyle stands as the core of her writings. The influence of her paintings adorn her poems and the issues that she holds so close to her heart are home exile, freedom, identity, religious conflicts and so on. The present paper aims at exploring the myriad themes depicted by Dharker in her poems.

INTRODUCTION:

“I was born a foreigner

*I carried on from there
to become a foreigner everywhere
I went, even in the place planted
with my relatives.”*

(Minority)

Imtiaz Dharker occupies an important place as one of Britain's most inspirational contemporary poets. Born in Pakistan in 1954, she was brought up in Scotland; but she severed all her ties to marry an Indian. She now shuttles between India and London. Here poetic composition being a confluence of three cultures, the question of her national identity always lay at the back of her mind.

Imtiaz Dharker belongs to the generation of post-independence women poets who have gone out to prove that Indian English poetry not only matches the best anywhere world wide, but it is also here to stay. Among the other better known poets are Kamala Das, Melanie Silgado, Sujata Bhatt, Eunicede Scuzza, Mamta Kalia, Jara Patel, Menka Shivdasani, Divakaruni Bhatt and a host of others. These women poets have not only widened the horizons of their poetic canvas but have also proved that poetry can be simple, suggestive and highly evocative too. They have given vent to their anguish, agony, frustrations, humour, observations and reflections without any trace of pretension or bias. The pain and poignancy endured in

suffocation and the suppression suffered have found a justifiable outlet through their creative compositions.

A spirited poet, Dharker has also scripted and directed a hundred films and audio-visuals centering on education, reproductive health and rehabilitation centre for women and children. She was awarded the silver Lotus for a short film made in India and various other awards for her documentaries. An accomplished artist she has had nine solo exhibitions of pen – and – ink for the 2008 Manchester poetry prize with Coral Ann Duffy and Gilian Clarke.

Dharker has composed a number of poems which are compiled into six collections.

- Purdah (1989)
- Postcards from God (1997)
- I speak for the Devil (2001)
- The Terrorist at my table (2006)
- Leaving Fingerprints (2009)
- Over the Moon (2014)

A brief review of the following poems reveals more than what the eyes can take in and the senses can comprehend.

The poem '*Purdah*' appeared in Dharker's first collection of poetry. The term 'Purdah' or 'Pardaa' is a Persian word which means 'curtain' and this was used to conceal women from men.

According to Wikipedia, the term 'purdah' is "a curtain which makes sharp separation between the world of man and that of a woman, between the community as a whole and the family which is its heart between the street and the home, the public and the private just as it sharply separates society and the individual".

The purdah represents two significant requisites:

- Physical segregation of the sexes.
- The requirement for women to cover their bodies and conceal their form.

'Purdah I' provides an interesting perspective on the ideas of people in general,; and how they relate to a woman specifically.

*"One day they said
She was old enough to learn some shame.
She found it came quite naturally.*

*purdah is a kind of safety...
The body finds a place to hide
The cloth fans out against the skin
much like the earth that falls
on coffins after they put the dead men in.” (Purdah I)*

The above lines imply that when the world starts seeing a girl as an object, she ought to respond by taking recourse to purdah. The purdah also stands as a metaphor for the way women seek refuge and retreat into shells to be safe from harm and disapproval. The purdah also stands as an alienation from one's own self, where a girl is forced to do what is expected of her rather than what she feels. The social pressure and stress makes one lose a sense of being true to oneself.

Women, from a very early age, are taught about their gender and the shame associated with it and Dharker's views relates from these early teachings.

In the beginning, the girl who uses the purdah considers it as something distinct or separate from her, but slowly she becomes accustomed to it and it comes to be associated with her perception of herself and the outside world. Purdah are windows shuttered upon a private world and like a traveler she moves between cultures exploring the dilemmas of negotiation among countries, lovers and children.

‘She stands outside herself’

The girl is capable of distancing her personality from her physical state. Realization dawns and she begins to see how completely dependent she is on the patriarchal structures that govern social norms and conventions. The purdah also prevents her from exercising her freedom as an individual. Figuratively the space of the woman is limited to her own world. The purdah restricts her vision of the world as well as her experience of life.

Central to the poem is the issue of gaze which is approached both from the view point of the girl and from the position of those who objectify and situate her. The purdah or the 'veil' serves as a safety from prying eyes and the fact that the cultural burden demands a nuanced reading of the complex circumstances in which she is located. Therefore she is eternally engaged in the process of self-examination, trying to figure out her own situation and the world around her.

In 'Purdah II' Dharker interweaves the experience of her own conflicts that she encountered within the confines of her own identity. Women being viewed as mere commodities their spirits are dampened when they realize that they live in a world filled with hypocrites and therefore cannot give vent to their feelings.

What lies at the core of her writings is the aspect of female sexuality. In addition to this is the mental purdah set by the myriad customs and traditions. The religious and ethnic history also sets its innumerable barricades and even place hurdles in the way of their mental progress. In the end, the woman finds herself losing her real identity and becoming the 'Another Woman'. Her religion, culture and society give birth to the another woman from within her. Finding no other alternative, this is the only choice that she has to resort to She concludes by saying.

*“Mother I find you staring back at me
When did my body agree
to wear your face ?”* (Choice III)

Even girl being rebellious in her early years do not wish to fall into the same slot as her mother. She even tries to escape the same fate; but slowly with time recapitulates the ways and attitudes of her own mother and steps into those very shoes that she earlier detested.

Finally it is not only the religion or culture that set up mental barricades, but also love, marriage, relationships, motherhood, maturity and the process of ageing which drowns a woman into submission thereby restricting herself within the confines of the mental purdah.

Postcards from God is the second collection by Dharker. The disquietudes in the poets chosen society is meditated upon. It is assumed that god is a visitor looking at a world which he disapproves. Some of the poems concern politics and communal rioting. The poems are doorways leading out into the lanes and shanties, where strangers huddle, bereft of the tender grace of attention.

*“Here, in this strange place,
In a disjointed time,
I am nothing but a space
That someone has to fill
Images invade me.
Pictures postcards overlap my empty face,
Demanding to be stamped and sent”.* (Posrcards from God I)

The above lines indicate the image of god as a blank canvas filled with images, postcards and print. He is a 'space' that someone has to 'fill'. The highly visual poems like her black and white drawings are compressed of patterns, lines and repetitions.

Anguish of a metropolis ravaged by extremism and fundamentalists intolerance find its way into these poems. The landscapes of the self and the city expand to embrace the world in a manner that is casual, playful and unapologetic..

This collection of poems although not so rich in imagery as the 'Purdah' collection has been enriched by Dharker with other implied dimensions.

The themes taken up in 'Purdah' has been extended in 'Postcards' from God'. The general idea taken up is how people use religion and culture to gain and use power and how violence against mankind stands at the centre of the society.

Dharker being a powerful poet uses her soul status to create poems which explores the larger social problems.

The poems from this collection '*I Speak from Devil*' explore the place of women in contemporary societies both in the east and the west.

*"What happens when the self
squeezes past the easy cage of bone ?"* (Honour Killing)

These are the lines from her poem 'Honour Killing' which gives voice to satan in its powerful portraits of the female body as a site of oppression and revelation. Although not didactic or political, the poems resonate a strong social conscious, which is apparently seen in her documentary films too.

The body of a woman is a territory that is possessed and owned by herself or by someone else.

*'They'll say,
she must be from another country'* (They'll say..)

traces a journey starting with a striptease where the claims of nationality, religion and gender are cast off, to allow an exploration of new territories, the spaces between countries, cultures and religions.

The little speaks for the devil in acknowledging that women in many societies are respected only when they carry someone else inside them – a child in a way, 'to be possessed' is to be set free.

*"Words are door
And dreams are floors,
And the walls we built
To hold the world
Are only made*

*of light and shade
A spinning space
where everything can change” (I Speak for the devil)*

The hope of God is something to be looked for between space. One needs to enter into oneself and scrape away all queries.

*“The devil is a territory
that lets you believe you belong
happy when you worship
at the mirrors” (I Speak for the devil)*

There are devils everywhere and they appear in different forms, shapes and figures. To get rid of the devil is a mistaken thought. These lines from the lyric. ‘In bed with the devil’ is very interesting as it makes us realize the force of devils working.

*“He’s at it again,
making pacts for power,
hoping for a shower of goodies
if he plays it right”. (In bed with the devil)*

What can be more ironical than the fact that poets be more ironical than the fact that poets also sacrifice all their concern for art, society and humanity at the altar of ‘Survival’. In a very straight forward manner the poet says that meddling with politics is indispensable to the existence of the poet.

The Terrorist at My Table is a very successful collection of poems; an anonymous man is seen as a terrorist, freedom fighter, guerilla warrior and martyr before being cast as

‘a boy who looks like your son’ (The Right Word)

In these poems Dharker strips through all our superfluous layers of pretentious tolerance and states.

*‘Here are the facts, fine
As onion rings.
The same ones can come chopped
or sliced’. (The Terrorist at my Table)*

We find a fine reflection of the poets insight vision and poetic sensibilities. There is also a fine blend of humor, honesty and loss. There are some crucial questions posed by these

poems which reflect on the kind of life that we live, about a person who shares everything, with others including his life and body, when life happens to be controlled by others and when the world shifts and reforms itself around our doubts and beliefs.

Leaving Fingerprints is the last collection of poems by Dharker she punctuates the poems with undulant landscapes. This collection also lends itself to the swirling contours that are the poets black and white illustrations.

In the poets own words the poem and the drawing are ‘like crossing the same terrain by different modes of transport. They explore different aspects of an image.’ The poems in this collection are almost a part of the same vehicle, charting, by turns, the passage of people and the policing of identity, through text and texture.

With suggestions of permanence, immutability and ownership, the poems also deal with a woman in exile, unsure of her place in the world. It stands as a counterpoint to the nagging fear of effacement that lurks around the foundations and bubbles to the surface.

The lines from the poem ‘Her footprint vanishes’:

*“She disappeared without a trace,
If there were footprints on the sand,
the sea got there,
before anyone saw and wiped,
her off the face of the earth”.* (Leaving Fingerprints)

makes it easy to see the appeal of the fingerprints and Dharker as a diasporic writer.

Dharker explores many issues including ‘real country’, ‘movement’ ‘transition’ ‘crossing over; conflict between secular and religious cultures in a world of fear and emergent fundamentalisms. A truly global poet, her works speak with great emotional intelligence to those who have even remotely felt adrift in the world we in habit which is undoubtedly complex and multi cultural.

The themes that Dharker deals with are childhood home, exile, freedom, journeys, gender politics, geographical and cultural displacement, religious strife, communal conflict, national identity and much more. Her poems are not only imagistic and richly textured but also questioning. All these themes are handled very deftly by her. Dharker’s images to merely create a poetic effect but like blazing fire compel the readers to take notice.

Conclusion:

Being a prolific painter, the influence of her paintings are strongly depicted in her works. Her works being powerfully social, religious and racial are consciously feminist, consciously political and consciously of a multiple outsider. Her multiple identity makes her a keen observer of the political activities, urban violence, religious anomalies which she raises to an unobtrusive level.

According to Arundhati Subramaniam,

“Here is no glib internationalism or modish multiculturalism..... displacement here no longer spells exile; it means an exhilarating sense of life at the interstices. There is an exultant celebration of a self that strips off layers of superfluous identity with grace and abandon, only to discover that it has not diminished but grown larger, generous, more inclusive”.

So, we find the characteristics of Imtiaz Dharker’s poetry are a concern for the marginal figures in society, through an emphasis on issues that do not receive similar.....

According to Michael Hulse,

“Tension is the key. And it is to the tension in her poetry that Imtiaz Dharker’s rhythmic skills her variable line lengths, her almost-but-not quite iambic metre, her hung or displaced lines-invariably direct our attention”.

However, the poet, Imtiaz Dharker discusses concepts of national identity and how they have influenced her writing. She says that ‘Nationalhood’ is often used as a camouflage for bigotry, as an excuse for chauvinism, as a means of excluding other - the ideal situation is to be able to enjoy and celebrate the pleasures of your nation and to open up to other cultures’.

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