



'POSSESSION' TO 'PERSON': THE JOURNEY OF WOMEN IN IMTIAZ DHARKER'S POETRY

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Abstract

Imtiaz Dharker as an emerging poet focuses on the sufferings of women overpowered by the corrupt and inhuman male dominant code in her poetry and lashes out at the social injustice, racial discrimination and sexual entrapment that beset women and destroy their self. Her writings in a major way seek to dismantle the male hegemony and valorise the 'other' and legitimise a space for women where she can actualise herself through a journey from 'possession' to 'person'. She raises her voice against the orthodox ways in which Islam is interpreted and followed, which have envenomed minds of people with racist/sexist/colour discriminations and have transformed the world into a battle field with their prejudiced notions. She is poignantly concerned with the contentious issues of virtue and vice, good and bad, moral and immoral. She knows exactly the meaning of being a 'woman' in a society where she is obliged to stifle her screams as well as smiles. This research paper focuses on the journey and sufferings of women shown in Imtiaz Dharker's works - *Purdah I*, *Purdah II*, and *Prayer* from a collection of poems- *Purdah*, and *Honour Killing* from a collection of poems - *I Speak for the Devil*, to assert themselves against the patriarchal society. This study concludes that the traditional practices in Muslim world are no longer acceptable as women are becoming more cautious and conscious about their rights. Her works advocate women to voice their conscience and protest against such deadening discriminations and devastating sanctions. Through her crusade she brought to Indian poetry a different background and a sense of political commitment.

Keywords: Devastating sanctions, Male hegemony, Prejudiced notions, Sexual entrapment, Social injustice.

INTRODUCTION

Imtiaz Dharker, a poet, artist and documentary film maker, regards her self as a Scottish Calvinist Muslim and her poetry is a confluence of these three cultures. It reflects her deeply sensitive and keenly insightful understanding of varied cultures and sensitises us to the wrongs and shortcomings of patriarchal society and male chauvinism. She moved to India after her marriage with an Indian, Anil Dharker. After the death of her husband she moved to London and married a Welshman, Simon Powell, the founder of "Poetry Live", and presently focuses on short movie making and writing poetry. It is this varied cultural experience that characterises her poetry and drawings and presents the fragile fabric of life, and her poems are a morale booster to feminism.

Accompanied by drawings, she has published five books of poetry, *Purdah and Other Poems* (1989), *Post Cards from God* (1997), *I Speak for The Devil* (2001), *The Terrorist at My Table* (2009), and *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009) in which she mainly deals with themes like home, freedom, journeys, communal conflict and gender politics. Dharker's poetry has a strong characteristic feature of 'transmediality' and 'transculturality' describing female experiences with more comprehensive realism in a very simple and artistic way, but raises her voice against an increasingly hostile and male-dominated social and cultural context. Bruce King

has rightly introduced her as “someone who knows her own mind rather than someone full of doubt and liberal ironies. (King,2001:321).

The Trauma of Cultural Exile and Alienation

Her poetry is not just confined to women’s issues but is a fierce critique of the state’s repressive political, social and cultural milieu. She highlights various issues and problems of women by employing a lot of irony, images and metaphors in her poetry. Through the first poem, “Purdah-1” in the collection of *Purdah and Other Poems* (1989), she speaks against the institution of the veil which is used as a weapon in structured Islamic culture to subjugate a woman. The poem deals with the turning point in the life of a Muslim girl when she experiences injustice, oppression and violence through the culture of ‘purdah’. She finds different meanings in the word ‘Purdah’ at different times. It is “a symbol of moral, religious and social taboo” (Choudhury, 2006:173-74). Dharker objects to the veil as she considers it more mental than physical., which secures her physical body and provides her safety from prying eyes. It is “A kind of safety/ the body finds a place to hide” (Pg 3 PAOP). But it also has a lot of negative effects. According to Dharker, woman is treated as all ‘body’ that needs a covering; her existence on this earth is considered as a symbol of lust and nothing else.

Dharker revolts against the ‘veil’ as it limits the opportunities to seek learning and enlightenment leading to the death of intellect just as earth covers the dead person-keeping them unaware of the experiences of the world: The cloth fans out against the skin Much like the earth that falls/ On coffins after they put the dead men in. (Pg 3 PAOP)

Purdah is considered here as coffin for women who are given a burial treatment while alive. She is annoyed with the system as it snatches from a woman her identity and treats her very harshly. The girl experiences very strange feelings under purdah. Even the people she has known from her childhood become strangers for her and she for them. She is looked at by everybody as if she is a piece of wonder: People she has known/ Stand up, sit down as they have always done/ But they make different angles. (Pg 3 PAOP)

Dharker’s focus is on the deadening aspects of the purdah system which becomes a barrier between a woman and the rest of the world. Purdah remains no longer physical covering but has become a social prerequisite to cultivate modesty in women. When Dharker was asked in an interview about the most powerful words anyone has spoken to her, her reply was “Now you’re old enough to learn some shame.” (What Are They Whispering, online) The sense of sin and shame is hammered into every Muslim woman’s mind from an early age. It is purdah which makes a woman believe that, “she is a sexual organ” and should not tempt men in any way: Carefully carrying what we do not own/ Between the thighs a sense of sin. (Pg 3 PAOP)

Since ages women have been taught to be ‘ashamed’ of their bodies. As a female, she has no choice but to accept it as sin. “The body-culture and its degrading fleshy enterprise, inflicts a guilty conscious” (Pandey, 1999:47-48). At every stage of their lives, women are made dependent on males, childhood is bonded to the father, adolescence is spent under the brother’s control, youth in the service of the husband and old age on the servitude of her sons. So she becomes a weak victim of oppressive structures and is forced to depend on men to save and protect her and rescue her from her plight: Passing constantly out of her own hands/ Into the corner of someone else’s eyes While doors keep opening/ Inward and again / Inward (Pg 4 PAOP). Dharker says, “I see a woman going deeper and deeper into herself, because the route outwards is barred to her. She is disappearing. I want her to come back and be seen (Hughes, 2006: Online).

She explores womanhood under Purdah as a “veiled ontology (or theory of existence) suggesting it as a ‘subtle and shifting psychological states of being” (Arana,2008:138-39). According to Dharker, the fate of a girl child in a conservative Islamic society is sealed from her very birth and with age it gets worse. Girls are forced to go through traditional, arranged marriages. They don’t have any choice of their own but to accept whatever will be chosen for them. Throughout their life, women have been taught to cover “their brightness tightly round”. These harsh practices of Islamic culture against woman are exposed / highlighted in “Purdah-II’ through two women- Saleema and Naseem. The poet refers to the story of Saleema, who is forced to marry within her community, although she is in love with an English man but her religion doesn’t allow her to marry outside her community, so she becomes a machine- a child-producer as her religion prohibits the use of contraceptives: Had annual babies, then rebelled at last/At last a sigh, behind the veil, of life;/ Found another man, became another wife (Pg 9 PAOP). In desperation, she takes a divorce and elopes with her lover hoping

that her predicament may change but, her condition doesn't change: Her neck is bowed as if she were a hood. watching, as any creature that lifts its head and sniffs the air only to scent its own small trail of blood (Pg 10 PAOP). She feels guilty for her revolt and marrying again as her condition is the same after her second marriage: disgust, pain, bondage and no freedom. She learns that a man is man no matter which community he belongs to. Naseem's condition is the same, who elopes with an English man, and is consequently excommunicated as her act brings shame for her family. the table is laden at Moharram/ and you are remembered. among the dead/ No going back 'The prayers said' (Pg 10 PAOP).

In an orthodox established Muslim culture, women are dealt with severe punishments for their 'loose morality'. All the women in "Purdah-II" by breaking religious rules, face the wrath of their community. They are punished physically, socially, culturally and psychologically. So the poem mocks the ways in which society restricts the freedom, dignity and choice of women. According to Patke: "Purdah-I" offers deeply felt evocations of the experience of growing up as a woman in an Islamic society while as "Purdah-II" elaborates on how the symbolic veil divides and suppresses" (Patke, 2003: 270-71).

Aspects of Female Sexuality

In several of her poems, Dharker highlights the crime of sexual exploitation against women through the institution of marriage that often begins at a very young age in Muslim culture. Islamic laws, which guide a man's life in Muslim culture, allow a man to marry more than one woman at a time and he is free to divorce a woman at any time. He also enjoys an unquestioned authority over his wife in all matters. So according to poet, women are treated as slaves or commodities and brought and sold against "Meher" assured to them in each marriage as after divorce she is again forced to marry another man. She loses her youth and womanhood in this process of marrying again and again. There is no love and mutual understanding between a wife and husband in forced traditional marriages but only lust. Dharker protests the ways in which a woman's choice is restricted and she is not allowed to marry according to her choice but to accept and marry the man chosen by her parents. As a result, she surrenders her happiness gladly and feels a sense of pride in it, so they indulge in each other's passionate delights without love: Night after virtuous night/ you performed for them. / they warmed your bed (Pg 7 PAOP).

As observed by Choudhury, Dharker's women enable us to examine large social problems pertaining to this religion, country and identity (2006: 173-74). A woman is held responsible for every natural thing (physicality) and suffers a lot in a conservative Muslim family. One more aspect of the Muslim culture which Dharker criticises is that women are excluded from all religious ceremonies. She objects and feels annoyed that a woman's biology is not regarded suitable for entering a mosque and so is given inhuman treatment. Dharker believes that the basic principles of Islam are made to favour a man and suppress women. She mocks that women have to observe Purdah even from God: But woman. Woman, / You have learnt / that when God comes / You hide your head (Pg 8 PAOP). Dharker exposes the hypocrisy in religious activities through the image of Haji in "Purdah- II": There was nothing holy in his look. / Hands that had prayed at Mecca/ Dropped a sly flower on your book (Pg 6 PAOP).

In the above lines sexual exploitation through religious activities is also indicated. The *molvi*, who pretends to be very religious offers flowers to girl in order to molest her that too during the teaching of Quran. So the irony of the religion is revealed in the poem. So Dharker concludes her first book by suggesting that a women's condition can only change when she will be able to break these shackles of culture, religion and society: The section concludes with a profound revelation that emancipation for a woman has to be only in the breaking of these barricades set by conventional codes of patriarchy and redefining herself (Baskaran, 2008: 33). / Sosh starts her next collection *Speak for The Devil* (2001) with this effort and dedicated it to all, "who stood up and spoke out... who are still struggling to find their feet and their voices... and who haven't yet begun" (Dharker, 2001). Thematically, it is concerned with gender issues, the spaces women are allowed to inhabit in different societies and their struggle to break free from restrictive gender roles. (Lehmann, 2012 Online).

The first poem in this collection, 'Honour Killing' narrates the pathetic condition of the girl who faced the backlash of religious orthodoxy and suffered because she tried to break the shackles of that relation which was a bondage to her. In traditional cultures like Islam, strict sexual codes for women are maintained and if a

woman tries to step out by choosing her own husband, or seeking divorce from an abusive husband, she is supposed to bring dishonour to her family and in order to discipline her, she is maimed or executed by her family on the name of 'honour killing' to maintain their reputation, spoiled by disobedient woman. As Dharker narrates, "In Lahore, in the last year of the 20th century, a woman was shot by her family in her lawyer's office. Her crime was that she had asked for a divorce. The whole Pakistan senate refused to condemn the act. They called it an 'Honour Killing.'" (Dharker,2001:11)

She mocks and revolts this act in the very first poem of the book, "Honour Killing" which she wrote in response to above event and arouses the feelings of the readers by sensitizing them, awakening their consciousness to an urgent feministic concern. Honour killings known as 'hari-kari' in Pakistan and enjoy a high level of support there despite widespread condemnation from human rights associations. The concept of woman as 'property' and 'honour' is so deeply rooted in the culture of Pakistan that the state ignores the regular occurrences of women being killed by their families. The poet feels empathy and desires that all women must protest against these deadly religious sanctions. Her belief is that a religion that treats its members in such a way can't claim to be a correct interpretation of faith. So she shuns the faith that doesn't allow her to enjoy her freedom, before emerging as an independent new free woman.

She starts a new journey towards her real identity by stripping herself of her clothes and kills her old self, which suffers dishonouring and humiliation due to the orthodox, restrictive culture in which she is raised. She cast off all claims of this religion, culture and country. In the process of taking off these claims, she realized that she has choices which she had never known before when her life was restricted: Born wearing it/I believed I had no choice (Pg 13 ISFD). She removes every part of her body before creating a new geography for herself. She does not even hesitate to remove her womb as she wants to be free from any kind of restriction which could be placed on her due to her sex: I'm taking off this skin, / and then the face the flesh, The womb (Pg 13 ISFD). Now when she is free from every gender restriction and religious affiliation, she demands: Let's see/ What I am in here /When I squeeze past / The easy cage of bone (Pg 13 ISFD). So the poem is a suitable piece in which she tries to clean herself by stripping herself naked, before creating a new identity for herself.

After killing her old self, she emerged as a new woman like the phoenix who is born out of her own ashes. She is now free to set her 'geography' by 'crafting', 'plotting' so she grows again but this time according to her own beliefs and without restrictions. So in the poem

'Honour Killing' it is not woman who is killed, but "anotion of honour that from the speaker's perspective burdens women with a life that forces them to be tray and neglect themselves" (Lehmann, 2012 Online). Although it is very dangerous to go against religious orthodoxy and face the wrath of religious leaders, Dharker doesn't fear but presents her thoughts and emotions in a bold and candid way and even doesn't hesitate to adopt sin as she, "got fed up with being good" (Pg 68 ISFD).

Conclusion

Imtiaz Dharker's poems are not mere flat statements on the female condition. They pose some basic questions such as- 'are women capable of facing the contradictions within themselves'? With enlightenment and education, women will grow to the reality of their existence. Freethinking will lead them to positions of free thought and action. Her writing shows the voice of woman cannot be muffled. For her, writing poetry is an act of purgation, an act of liberation from the patriarchal hegemony. Imtiaz Dharker may not be a radical progressive; she is definitely the forerunner of protest poetry. She voices her utter contempt against the sham in the society. Dharker's woman exhibits a purdah which is between her inner-self and her outer-world. For her womanhood is like a veiled existence (entity) under purdah. Dharker articulates women's helplessness, their pains and problems, their victimization through her poetry. She does not see herself as spokesperson of her community but the staunch supporter of woman individual.

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