



RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE QUEST FOR AGENCY AND WOMANHOOD IN POETRY OF IMTIAZ DHARKER

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ABSTRACT

Imtiaz Dharker questions the social and religious marginalization of women that have effected not only their physical and mental development but also psychological development. The transgressive appeal of her poems makes them an act of activism and survival. Her lived experiences have been honestly expressed in poetry. She asserts herself through poetry and it became an expression of revolt against deep rooted depression prevalent in a patriarchal society. Her first volume "Purdah" uses the burqa as a metaphor for obscurity of marginalization. She represents the essential womanhood, their desires and anguish, giving voice to the universally voiceless women. Through her poetry she shows that whichever religion the female belongs to, sufferings and atrocities are the same. They trace the trajectory of a woman's life from birth to death, burden of different roles and the resultant loss of identity. Such a poetic treatment results from the recent upsurge in feminist activity that helps women to shed the weight of patriarchy in order to feel the weightlessness of her 'self'. The present study attempts to map the struggle a woman undertakes to achieve progress from the imposed restrictions towards self-realization, agency and subjectivity of her own and to understand what it means to be a woman.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Sexuality, Purdah, Agency, Subjectivity, Imtiaz Dharker, Political Activism, Shame, Marginalization, Womanhood

INTRODUCTION

Indian women writing poetry is not a new phenomenon in literature. It is quite old. Eunice de Souza tells us: "Women have been writing poetry in India since about 1000 B.C. on religious and secular themes, and it is among these rather more distant ancestors that contemporary women writers are likely to find congenial voices and styles." Pashupati Jha notes that although Indian English poetry written by women marked its presence in the nineteenth century with arrival of Toru Dutt, further reinforced by Sarojini Naidu in the next century, this poetry, despite its strengths, lacked a sense of immediacy and intimacy of personal experience.

These poets were lacking in the exploration of their inner urge. But after the mid sixties of the twentieth century, a perspective change was noticed with the emergence of 'I' - an assertive self (233). Bruce King points out that Indian English poetry by women writers moved from such colonial and nationalistic themes as the reuniting of legends, praise of peasants, and from general ethical statements to writing about personal experience (Pathak, 39).

These poets fiercely express feminine sensibility, which articulate without inhibitions the plight and predicament of women doomed to live in an intensely man-made world. They are not only restricted to their own experience but what imparts deeper significance to their poems is their universality. They are dedicated to womanhood-its glories and sufferings, as they take note of the inner world frustrations and relationships. What is significant about women poetry in English after independence is the honest and concentrated communication of experience for its own sake. Traditional expectations of the family, obligations to the society, snatching away of the individual freedom, exploitation, hypocrisy and sham perpetuated in the name of matrimony will only result in identity crises. These writers would disapprove of the stereotypical roles and solutions. They have no inhibitions in giving due place to sexuality and the demands of body. By writing verses, writers like Kamla Das, Monika Varma, Mamta Kalia, Sujata Bhatt, Eunice de Souza and Imtiaz Dharker have attempted to create enough space for themselves and other women in the society. They have tried and fashioned a distinctive idiom for their use, which is another way of creating agency and space.

Most women poets writing in English from both the Indian subcontinent and the Diaspora can be regarded as post colonial authors. Their work is directed against the influences of colonialism and imperialism. Most of them can be recognized as feminists addressing gender oppression, and dominant traditions of class, caste and religion. Women living in the Diaspora also write about the impact of foreign cultures and societies on their lives (Papke, 52). These writers strive to create their own independent idiom based on their own diverse experiences. Their attempt to carve a separate niche and their feminine poetics, resulted from their disinterested attitude towards all customs, provide enough agency, unique individuality and self-assertion to these writers.

Quest for the 'Self' in Poetry of Imtiaz Dharker:

Imtiaz Dharker is one of the few Muslim women from the Muslim background. She was born in Lahore in 1954 and raised and educated in Scotland where she received an M.A in English literature and philosophy. She broke with her Pakistani family and married an Indian author from Hindu society. At present she divides her time between Glasgow and Mumbai. She has published three books of poetry: *Purdah* in 1989, *Postcards from God* in 1994, *I Speak for the Devil* in 2001. She found an entry into the domain of Indian English poetry with the collection of poems titled *Purdah*. Dharker could soon emerge as a promising new voice in the realm of Indian English Poetry. The present study aims to map out the struggle a woman undertakes to achieve her identity and aims to progress towards self-realization, agency and subjectivity of her own and to understand what it means to be a woman.

Each stanza in *Purdah* uses the burqa as a metaphor for the way women experience themselves and their surroundings and their comments on this in an ironic, humorous, angry or sad manner (Papke, 81). The juxtaposition of observation or statement and comparisons builds up the tension and the protest. This is Dharker's indictment: Islamic culture uses shame not only in order to repress a woman's sexuality and emotional independence. It leads women to falseness, ambiguity, distrust and isolation. The burqa, as a part of purdah, exercises pressure and dictatorial control over many aspects of lives of women and leads to alienation from one's own self (81). In the "Purdah II", Dharker elaborates how this mental purdah transcends the individual and exercises its fatal influence on the community. The experience of Muslim women in the Diaspora of England is a paradigm of the clash of cultures where the ignorance and arrogance of different religions and ethnic groups meet each other and result in terror and intolerance. "Purdah II" criticizes the arrogance and intolerance of the Muslim community and the racism of the other side. The poem reveals the arrogance of patriarchal religion. The Muslim and Christian religion are based on bloody sacrifices and they will never allow the self of the women to emerge:

"You never met those men

With burnt out eyes, blood
 A dripping from their beards
 You remember the sun
 Pouring out of Maulvi's hands
 It was to save the child
 The lamb was sacrificed to save the man'
 But woman, Woman,
 You have learnt
 That when god comes
 You hide your face"

Papke alleges that in a poem with similar title, noted confessional poet Sylvia Plath uses purdah as a metaphor for the unbearable oppression of women's sexuality and spirituality. The speaker in her poem denounces the hypocrisy of the purdah that pretends to protect women from public observation but rather exposes them to the curiosity of men (85).

One of the major concerns in Imtiaz Dharker's poetry is to present the hollowness of the social, cultural and religious restrictions on women which have robbed them of their potentialities. The coolness of treatment makes the expression very effective. A critic observes, "Imtiaz Dharker's humanistic and feminist concerns with her anguish and agony, sympathy and protest give the message silently, though it's deafening explosion has been felt everywhere." The social and cultural traditions insulting the individuality of a woman are seen in new light and new perspectives in her poetry.

"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 the skin,
 Much like the earth that falls
 On coffins after they put the dead men in."

Purdah is suppressive and deadening of the intellectual awakening and growth of a woman. It is a wall between the woman and the world. It curbs and restricts the speech and expression. It is a repression of will and choice. The dictated minds behind the purdah know behaviour and a code of conduct. There is an awareness of guilt in case of any violation of a code of conduct:

"Carrying carefully what we do not own
 Between the thighs a sense of sin."

As she admits, "Knowing you have traditionally been a victim doesn't make you a victim if you can see and assess what has happened to you". Imtiaz Dharker's work has been described by Bruce King as "consciously feminist, consciously political, consciously that of a multiple outsider". (Papke, 79). She feels her vulnerability and as Dharker presents she clings on to the purdah, the black robe as a source to hide herself.

Political Commitment in Poetry of Imtiaz Dharker

In the twenty first century while the feminists consider purdah as a hindering force, Dharker comes out with the highly challenging and novel idea that it is a welcoming one for a Muslim woman. It provides safety and helps the highly vulnerable body "find a place to hide" ("Purdah1"). "For Dharker, purdah is neither stifling nor an oppressive experience as posited by the colonizing powers" (Choudhury, 173). However, it restricts and suffocates her and Dharker very meticulously and ironically comments that the safety the purdah offers to a woman is that of a safety one finds inside the coffin after death. Dharker seems to believe that though it brought about seclusion to woman, yet it was introduced with the view of safeguarding their honour and pride. But in course of time, it started to deny her the right to express her mind, her likes and dislikes and as has been rightly commented by Choudhury, her poem projects "purdah as a symbol of moral, religious and social taboo. More than veiling of the body, it is the veiling of the mind that Dharker objects to" (174) in this

poem. *Purdah* also attempts to uphold the indispensable truth that purdah can only be sought as a temporary domicile for it cannot provide permanent solace to a woman's grieving soul.

Chaudhary held the view that Imtiaz Dharker bought a sense of political commitment to Indian poetry. *Purdah* justifiably looks at the world through the eyes of a sensitive and politically confident Muslim. Her poetry questions the western attempt to liberate the Muslim women. Hence for Dharker, purdah is neither stifling nor an oppressive experience as posited by the colonizing powers (173). Cynthia Enloe pays a close attention to the impact of colonialism on women worldwide. She argues that colonized women were represented in such a way that they became sex objects for western men. These representations served to justify imperial domination as western men pointed to women's supposedly powerless and unemancipated positions in their own countries (Chaudhary, 173). One of the aims of colonial governments in Muslim countries was to persuade women of these countries to remove their purdah so that they become liberated and civilized (173)

Dharker's *Purdah* poems do not subscribe to this Euro-centric view of Islam as patriarchal and oppressive of women, instead they project purdah as a symbol of moral, religious and social taboo. These poems present purdah as a result of shame or a sense of sin about gender and sexuality hammered into the minds of Muslim women. More so in an alien land, these teachings are hailed as superior because they protect the supposedly powerless women from those alien hands. All these women are fated to live and die with no will or choice of their own. They are "unwilling virgins" who had been taught to bind – "their brightness tightly round, whatever they might wear, in the purdah of the mind." This veil is not only a concealing garment but purdah of the mind. And: "They have all been sold and bought". Men who appeared in their life earlier or men about whom they dreamed are thing of the past, a matter of history. The girls feel a sense of pride in them and surrendered gladly to each other's passionate delights:

"Night after virtuous night, You performed for them, They warmed your bed."

Dharker too shows her inner life through her poetry like Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza. Her expression moves from the self towards the essential womanhood. It makes her expression truly universal and genuine. The title of her first volume of poems, 'Purdah' created controversy. For Islam, the term is related to religion but here it symbolizes marginalization, patriarchal discrimination and exploitation of women. The strong personality of Imtiaz can be known from her poetic works. She rightly places the purdah where it should be. Dharker's main theme is social change. A sharp note of anger is there in victim's voice. She is aware that how much power the words have. She calls purdah a powerful symbol to signify the domination of man over women, especially in Muslim society. A. K Tiwari says: "The purdah is an instrument of masculine effort to keep low the spirit of independence in women. The conformance to the norms of the purdah restricts and limits the roles of women, keeping them within the confines of Jenana apartments and keeps their status low" (262). Imtiaz need not search her identity or individuality. She has demolished the religious and cultural barriers prescribed by the patriarchal society and imposed and sometimes superimposed upon women. She has awakened women to the incalculable damage done to their psyche since centuries. She has also convinced them of the triumph of the essential woman in her.

The lived experiences of Imtiaz have been honestly expressed in her poetry with her wistfulness to assert herself and poetry writing became an expression of revolt against deep rooted dissatisfaction prevalent in a patriarchal society. She represents the essential every woman, their desires and anguish, giving voice to the universally voiceless women. Whichever religion the female belongs to, sufferings and atrocities are the same. They trace the trajectory of women's life from birth to death, burden of different roles and the resultant loss of identity. Such a poetic treatment results from the recent upsurge in feminist activity that helps women to shed the weight of patriarchy in order to feel the weightlessness of her 'self'.

In her tragic poem, "Honour Killing", the first poem in *I Speak for the Devil*, a young woman was brutally shot dead in her lawyer's office in Lahore in 1999. None else but her family did so. It was a poignantly moving and heart-rending scene. What was her crime? She had asked for a divorce. Instead of having the heart, or for that purpose even head, to condemn the killing at any level, it was welcomed as 'honour killing'. Imtiaz Dharker's sensitivity could not remain dumb or numb and it burst forth in her poem. Its reading makes a

powerful impact and it sensitizes the reader, awakens and rouses his conscience to the urgent feminist concerns. She says:

“At last I’m taking off this coat, this black coat of a country that I swore for years was mine,
 this black veil of a faith that made me faithless to myself, that tied my mouth,
 gave my god a devil’s face, and muffled my own voice”.

The poetess understands the gravity of the situation and strongly feels that women must voice their conscience and protest against such deadening discriminations and devastating sanctions.

“Purdah-II” is more elaborate, more dramatic and more eloquent in voicing the imminent concerns of lasting significance. It is a poem about many women and all merge into one. All these women in the poem merge into one woman; they all serve the same servitude – physical, psychological, social and cultural. Those who try to break cover with the hope and dream of a free new world face uncertainty and suffer excommunication. So the poem is an undaunted criticism of the way the society works against the freedom, dignity, will and choice of women even in alien land, here England. A group of twenty women hears the mechanical recitation from the hustling pages of the holy Koran without understanding a word, its meaning or sense. This is the shallowness of the traditional education with no light of knowledge.

Lee Jenkins asserts that Dharker’s poems navigate what she calls the fine edge between being trapped and being free. Purdah- the practice of secluding women from public observation through the wearing of the veil and by the use of screens and walls within the home has been both defended as an oppositional and revolutionary gesture and decried as a coercive, institutional mandate (117). The female persona in “Honour Killing” removes the veil to speak on behalf of a woman shot by her family:

“I’m taking off this veil
 This black veil of a faith
 That made me faithless
 To myself,
 That hid my mouth
 Gave my god a devil’s face’ and muffled my own voice”

She refuses what Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques as the mode of defining women primarily in terms of their object status, as victims of religious, patriarchal, racial economic oppression (Jenkins, 117). Dharker’s consciously feminist and consciously political poetry indicts Muslim religion and culture from exercising control over women’s bodies and minds and for alienating them from their own self. Her poems accuse the Islamic tradition of arrogance which leads to isolation from and hostility towards other social groups. Especially in the Diaspora, this vicious circle creates violence and terror and makes escape extremely difficult. Under these circumstances, there will be no communication between cultures. Dharker basically starts with a call for mutual respect. Concerned with social injustice, Dharker develops a subtle awareness of the learning required to understand the different experiences of women (Papke, 85)

Dharker emphasizes that purdah was necessary in the beginning of Islam when the Arabian countries were torn by turmoil and social strife. Thus purdah ensured safety to women then and it also became a symbol of high status. However, today, purdah is viewed as a flagrant violation of the basic rights, freedom and dignity of women. Purdah is treated as symbol of repression on women as it is devastatingly ruinous to the personality of women. To be covered from head to foot in the black veil is more indispensable to Muslim women. There has been and is a periodic revolt and heated controversy in the print and electronic media against this practice to regenerate and rejuvenate female psyche.

CONCLUSION

Thus on the basis of reading of selected poems of Imtiaz Dharker, it can be said that she fiercely expresses feminine sensibility, which articulate without inhibitions the plight and predicament of women doomed to live in an intensely man-made world. She strives to trace the struggle a woman undertakes to achieve progress from the imposed restrictions towards self-realization, agency and subjectivity of her own and to understand what it means to be a woman. Her poetry is an undaunted criticism of the way the society works against the freedom, dignity, will and choice of women. Women must voice their conscience and protest

against deadening discriminations and devastating sanctions. In the beginning they may suffer but it is essential for the entire womanhood and the essential life serving feminine core.

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