



Negotiating Gender, Religion and Homelessness: An Analysis of Imtiaz Dharker's *Purdah and other Poems*.

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Abstract

In this paper, I have attempted to present a study of selections from Imtiaz Dharker's collection of poems *Purdah and other Poems*. In these poems of hers, I have tried to argue how a poet with a multicultural background negotiates with her religion, gender and sense of homelessness. Through the analysis of her collection *Purdah and other Poems*, I have argued that a poet like Imtiaz Dharker has critiqued the native practices of her own culture but not shunned them all.

Keywords: Religion, Purdah, Inwardness, Refugee, home/lessness, and In-betweenness.

Imtiaz Dharker was born in 1956 in Lahore, Pakistan but her family migrates to Scotland when she was one year old and so was educated in Britain. Initially married to Anil Dharker, a famous Indian journalist and writer, lives in Mumbai and then once again moves to London as she got married to Simon Powell, the founder of the organisation "Living poetry". Thus, Dharker has been associated with both the South Asian subcontinent and England, especially Mumbai and Glasgow and she divides her time between these two worlds. However, understandably, the spatial and cultural diversity that Dharker inherits reflects conspicuously in her poetry in a sense that they all talk about negating the traditional ways of thinking in our society, along with a constant quest for a new identity as a woman and as a poet, she too grapples with this sense of rootlessness as all diasporic writers do. In this paper, I intend to understand a kind of in-betweenness in Dharker's poems, her effort to negotiate conflicts of religion, gender, identity and homelessness in her book, *Purdah and Other Poems*.

Lopamudra Basu in an article in Roshinika Chaudhuri's edited work *A History of Indian English Poetry* has devoted a chapter on Diasporic women poets and has clubbed Dharker along with Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt as all were born in the 1950s and all of them have vented out the sense of in-betweenness in their poems as they have all drifted away from their roots and migrated and have adopted new home. Basu identified a sense of hybridity in their language and beingness that is very pertinent in their poems. To focus on this sense of Dharker, Basu writes, 'Imtiaz Dharker's predicament of negotiating

bilingualism and biculturalism in her poetry is evident in several poems in her collections' (Chaudhuri 391). This paper too seeks to present a study of this hybridity in her religious belief, gender identity, sense of home and rootlessness in some of the selected poems in her first collection of poetry called, *Purdah*, published in 1988. Imtiaz Dharker, to be precise belongs to the "postmodern" phase of Indian English poetry as put by Makrand Paranjpe in his edited book on poetry, *Indian Poetry in English*. According to Paranjpe, this phase of poetry in India can be periodized after 1980. Thus, it is the generation of poets who emerged in the era of the '80s and '90s that are known to belong to this postmodern group of poets. Some other noteworthy poets apart from Dharker, in this period, are Agha Shahid Ali, Saleem Peeradina, Manohar Shetty and Vikram Seth. Along with these, some notable women poets have carved out a niche for them like Melanie Silgado, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, Charmayne De Souza, Mamta Kalia, Tara Patel. Though generally speaking, this phase of poetry in English was not only very diverse thematically but was experimental in its form and content.

Thematically, as put by Subhash Chandra Saha, women poets of the postmodern era have, "portrayed in a subversive idiom their desires, lust, sexuality and gestational experiences" (Nayar 32), and though Imtiaz Dharker is no exception to this trend of poetry writing there is also a sense of dissent in her poetry against the Islamic practices, her religion, the condition of women in general and her quest for an anchorage as a poet and individual. Dharker with her subtle images, common symbols and piercing metaphors seems to not only question the traditional ways of a patriarchal society but also negate the stereotypical representation of some of the things about the Muslim religion and the compulsion to be rooted. Dharker apart from being a poet is also a painter and a documentary filmmaker hence we find a zeal in her to represent her poetic images in the canvas along with her poems. She is one of those poets for whom art is not just an inspiration but a parallel reflection of creativity. As among her many recognitions, Dharker's most coveted achievement has been the Queen's gold medal for poetry in 2014. The titles of other collections published by Dharker are *Postcards from God* (1997), *I Speak for the Devil* (2001), *The Terrorist at my Table* (2006), *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009) and *Over the Moon* (2014), and *Luck is the Hook* (2018).

Purdah, published in 1988 was her first collection of poems. As the title suggests, the word *Purdah* means not only a cover to protect the modesty of a woman but also a kind of confinement. Since the *purdah* symbolically is associated with Muslim women, one can ask the question of whether such a practice is only among Muslim women. Is it not that *purdah* in a metaphoric sense binds the women of all communities? Is there a religious justification for such a practice? Whether such a practice has to do anything with the cultural richness of a particular community? Or, is it just the notion of women as custodians of the honour and sanctity of a community that has led to the practice of *purdah*? However, Dharker's first poem in this collection, "Purdah I", brings forth this conflict of *purdah* as something that ensures the safety and security of women and on the other hand as an enclosure that throttles a woman. In "Purdah I", she writes: "Purdah is a kind of safety/The body finds a place to hide" (Purdah I 3). So, it is clearly understood that a woman's body should be hidden, kept undercover. The piece of cloth used to cover the body of the woman ensures

a safe space for a woman, and exclusive space of safety and security. Nevertheless, Dharker critiques the imposition of purdah as there is no sense of security and safety for a woman, instead of life changes with the imposition of purdah. The imposing presence of “they”, who not only, “teach a sense of shame” to girls, but also inculcate “a sense of sin/that we carry between our thighs” (Purdah I, 3). But the hypocrisy of this moraliser prescribing the norms of feminine behaviour is put forward by the irony of the situation that Dharker puts forth, as it is even within the “safety” of the purdah that a woman can sense the gaze of the men. Within her private space, she can feel their gaze. “But they make different angles/ in the light, their eyes aslant, / a little sly” (Purdah I 3).

The purdah is not an ordinary piece of cloth. It grows slowly but firmly and envelopes the entire existence and identity of a woman. Purdah in this poem becomes a metaphor for the shroud used to cover the corpse before it is put in the grave for a final sleep. Hence with the onset of purdah in her life, a woman approaches her death, not a physical one but with a denial of selfhood to her she slowly proceeds to be a nonentity and thereby approaches her death.

The poem “Purdah I” is also about the dynamics of space that a woman negotiates with from within her purview of purdah. Since a woman is robbed of her selfhood and freedom and so in this status, I think she becomes a victim of the powerful male hierarchy. To bring in the dichotomy of the inner and the outer space, the male, justly belongs to the outer world while the inner world has to be nurtured by the feminine being. As a woman transgresses to this outer space, which is predominantly the male world, she has to do it within the walls of her purdah. The narrative voice in the poem is initially aware of the two different spaces in the poem, one within the purdah and an earlier one outside the purdah. She uses a metaphor of a room to bring out the spatial tension: “A Night filters inward/ through our bodies’ walls. /Voices speak inside us, /echoing in the spaces we have just left” (Purdah I 3).

This awareness or rather a sense of unease about the all-encompassing Purdah becomes part of herself hardly parting away from it. Bringing in the metaphor of a room, Dharker further suggests that it is only when she is within the four corners of a room, “she stands outside herself” (Purdah I 4). The narrative voice in the poem can relate this experience to all the women who have a similar fate, who are resigned to this fate. As rightly put by Annamma Joseph in her article, “The Metamorphosis of the Purdah”:

Throughout, the poem traces an introverted movement. This movement from the centre to the Periphery is suggested by lines such as, ‘she half remembers things/from someone else's life and ‘doors keep opening inward and again / inward. The inward movement as put by Dharker makes her a mere ‘clod of earth’, put on a coffin/dead body so that there is no way to return from the inward world. (Nayar and Shah 112)

So, these women are destined to be victims, as “they” endow the women with purdah that ensures a permanent stay in the inner domain. The inwardness makes them wear not only the purdah, a piece of cloth, physically worn to cover the body but also, “The purdah of the mind”, as Dharker says in “Purdah II”. In “Purdah II” like the poem “Purdah I”, there is a dichotomy of two different places that the poet inhabits, her own country and the country into which they have migrated and Dharker writes about the conflict within, it is “a coin of comfort” that “rattles against the strangeness of foreign land” (Purdah II 5). The sense of comfort in this alien land is derived from the reading of the old Koran at home. “In the tin box of your memory/ a coin of comfort rattles/against the strangeness of a foreign land.” The experience depicted in “Purdah II” corresponds to her own experiences of her stay in England. As a woman, she has been taught that as “God comes/ you hide your head” (Purdah II 8). It is her religion that gives her a certain anchorage in a country not her own. In a review of this book *Purdah* by Salil Tripathi she has been quoted as, “From a cultural, not religious sense I took it on myself to go back to Muslim ways.” To this Tripathi adds that “she was fascinated by the outward symbol of Islam-the rozas, the reading of the Quran and she accepted these unquestioningly, she wanted to belong, quite strongly” (qt. in Tripathi). In another poem in this collection, “Pariah” she writes about the religion as her refugee, “There is no help but Allah/ and the rituals” and finally in all such rituals there is, “a kind of peace”. (Pariah 17)

However, Dharker is also quite candid to expose the corrupt practices of religion especially institutionalised religion and its conspiracy to make women realise that they are vulnerable. The religious propriety of the young Haji is put to falsehood as his “pink cheeks” and “startling blue eyes” make the intuitive move towards the young girl who has come for prayer (Purdah II 6). The solace and assurance of religion are lost as in today's world both God and Godman have turned hostile and so, “He does not look at you. /Instead, A woman comes with her eyes concealed” (Grace 11). The act of concealment is out of shame and agony because their mouth “trails” behind them as they are “defiled” women (Grace 11). In the poem, ‘Going Home’ too the need for concealment is imperative for even a twelve years old girl in the poem as she insists, ‘Mummy put me in Purdah/or he’ll see the hair sprout in my lap. / Mummy put me in purdah quick/ or he’ll see’. (Going Home 24) Dharker tells the stories of girls who, ‘have all been sold and bought’, two such ostracized women. One of them is Salima, who is disillusioned about the purity and chastity of the women in the celluloid world. After her stint in the celluloid world, with her upcoming “old age”, “She married back home, as good girls do” (Purdah II 9). After marriage, there were babies produced “annually” and “even after all this they rebelled” (Purdah II 9). The painful conclusion of this narrative is that even to be “a good girl”, there is an act of rebellion on her part which makes her unwanted being in society. The other girl Naseem had run away with an English boyfriend. For her absence from home, she is considered dead. Though Dharker portrays a typical Indian sensibility where a mother is tear-stained, while the aunts and other women of the neighbourhood “gossip”, in a situation where a daughter has eloped that too with a man of a different religion. For that matter in her poem “Going Home” (Dharker 23), there is an emphasis that western education and upbringing can only malign the sanctity of a home. “They’ll come to no good, /daughters higher-educated, mixing / with ‘belaiti’ boys. They’ll regret it.” (Going Home

25). On the occasion of Muharram, “the table is laden” and Naseem is remembered among the dead. Thus, the inward movement in “Purdah I” resonates in “Purdah II” as the only fate for any woman is death for there is no way out for them to transgress the inner domain (Purdah II 10). Women having transgressed their homes have no homes for the return to home was a distant dream then. As in her poem “Going Home”, she writes about the image of women huddled on the railway platform waiting for the train to take them home. We can see the anxiety of homelessness in Dharker where she also yearns for her roots and as if identifies herself as one among these women.

“On the platform I/could have the waiting-woman/ who rake the day with their eyes, rake the years for a hope of home/ as crows comb through the sky.” (Going Home 23) As put by Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands*, ‘that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the things that were lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind.’ (Rushdie 10) Rushdie writes that writers like him who are in exile or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by a sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back,’ Dharker too claims her South Asian legacy in the ghazals and Punjabi songs, and the cinematic images that come to her: Her mind rewinds/ the ghazals and Punjabi songs./The camera behind her eyes/Watches as she trails/Slow-motion chiffon veils; dancing,/she is the heroine/of films that come from home (Home Coming 25). Dharker in a way is a true representative of what Rushdie calls a translated wo/man by migration, one who proudly asserts her Indianness by enchasing upon her bilingual legacy of Urdu and Punjabi and also, ‘bearing across’, (Rushdie 17) which is the meaning of the word translation as Rushdie states in *Imaginary Homeland*, she also makes the English language her own.

For anybody growing up in the '50s, the Partition of India and the creation of two new nations was an inevitable recurring memory in the family narratives of the many South Asians. Along with migration across the newly created borders the pain of homelessness lingers in all the works written in the aftermath of Partition. The borders become the sites of conflict and she uses these metaphors to the relationship with her lover/ husband and the mechanicalness of lovemaking, “when the body becomes a territory/ shifting across uneasy sheets. Home has not been the same over the years because it no more welcomes you, “Having come home /all you can do is leave.” The narratorial voice of this poem, “Battle Lines”, identifies the change that the so-called home has taken over. She brings out the irony of leaving behind your home. “Because, leaving home, /You call yourself free. /Behind, behind you, barbed wire grows/Where you once/Had planted a tree” (Battle- Lines 49).

Dharker’s poems are all very relevant in today's India of sectarian violence, intolerance and religious bigotry. Her faith in religion turns out to be false as Dharker tells in her poem *Grace*, that she has seen the “drought/the blazing eye of faith can bring about” (Grace 11). Like “Grace”, “Purdha I” and “Purdha II” in another poem of this section, “Prayer” she draws upon the image of the worshipers in a mosque and compares them with their sandals outside the mosque. The worshiper’s identities can be discerned by the “prints/worn into leather, rubber, plastic” (Prayer 13), and the prayers they offer are the,

“shuffling hopes, /pounded into print”. And there are the devotees inside who are people with a common identity, who are not confident about the purpose of their religion and Dharker expresses her inquisitiveness about the faith that has no power to redeem in these lines: “What are they whispering? /Outside, in the sun, /such a quiet crowd/of shoes, thrown together/ like thousand prayers/washing against the walls of God (Purdah 13).”

Dharker's brilliance lies in her ease to relate something very ordinary, mundane and common to express a very complex world, a tension that a human being lives with. In her poems, her humanist agenda is most imperative and that is what makes her poems touch our hearts. Her poems though have the gloomy picture of the world, which has the despair of being lonely and uprooted yet a note of optimism always rings through her poetry. As she writes in “Stones”: Your history is a trapdoor/ that you must struggle through/blinking from the darkness/into a shower of light. (Stones 53)

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