

An articulation of extreme grief and agony in Imtiaz Dharker's *Purdah and Other Poems*

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Abstract:

*The modern Indo-English women poets exhibit their ideas and opinions on a few common themes like identity crisis, diaspora, religious orthodoxy, feminism, women empowerment etc. Some of the most common poets are Charmayne D'Souza, Mamta Kalia, Gauri Deshpande, Tara Patel, Sujata Bhatt, who write on all boldly revealing feminist affairs from their standpoint. Out of them Imtiaz Dharker, (b.1954) is a poet, an artist and a documentary filmmaker, who was born in Lahore and brought up in Glasgow, Scotland. She describes herself as a "Scottish Muslim Calvinist"¹ with an Indian heart. In "Purdah & Other Poems", Dharker distinctly displays the febleness of Muslim women by condemning the religious dogmas and doctrines which have been articulated by the Muslim society. She has embellished an altogether new arena for the readers through twenty five poems, included in the book *Purdah and Other Poems*, which highlights various issues like search for identity, diaspora, man-woman relationship, cultural displacement, etc. This book is an exemplary prototype of Dharker as a feminist poet who is a pastmaster at surveying diverse Muslim themes from a Muslim woman's point of view. She brings in blaze the gender biasness, religious prejudices and cross-cultural differences which Muslim women become reconciled to.*

This paper is an attempt to justify that Purdah and Other Poems is an indispensable contribution to modern Indo-English Poetry and literature which has contributed its mite to make us aware of the predicament of the Muslim women in general and womankind as a whole.

Key words: Gender biasness, identity crisis, diaspora, religious prejudices, feminism, Muslim themes, women empowerment.

Indo-Anglian poetry made its beginning by Henry Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt. It further progressed by the contribution of Manmohan Ghose, Sarojini Naidu and Sri Aurobindo. Post-Independence Indo-Anglian literature saw the emergence of numerous writers of verse like A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel. Then, emerged a poetic expression by poets like Kamala Das and Gauri Deshpande, which was not in tune with their male counterparts. Their poetry marked the beginning of a separate genre which was shockingly blunt and had no inhibitions. Thereafter, a literary canon of feminist poetry was popularized was poets like Charmayne D'Souza, Mamta Kalia, Imtiaz Dharker, Tara Patel, Sujata Bhatt etc. Imtiaz Dharker is a contemporary feminist poet and filmmaker who made her debut in poetry by a collection of 25 poems called *Purdah and Other Poems*. In this book, Dharker explores various themes like marriage as a 'contract', woman as a commodity which can be 'sold & bought'², lack of freedom, rigid boundaries of religion, confinement to the process of reproduction, domestic violence, women as mere objects for sexual pleasure, etc.

Dharker's first poem 'Purdah I' from *Purdah and Other Poems* is all about liberation of women from a life wrapped by not just a physical purdah but more importantly the purdah on minds. As Jayakrishnan Nair also says "the purdah here is mental rather than physical"³ (Nair 2014, 143). Dharker emphasizes that women themselves can dispose of this veil by

realization and active participation in this struggle against oppression. In the poem "Purdah I", she says:

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.
(Dharker 1989, 3)

These lines from the poem 'Purdah I' point towards the helplessness of women, which they learn to live with, staying inside the veil. Dharker illustrates Muslim women's emotions by comparing the veil to a coffin. She has expressed their misery by simply calling them 'dead'⁴. Muslim women do not find this 'cloth'⁵ as a part of their identity, they rather see it as 'a place to hide'⁶ their agony. As Nair states, "The externally worn veil of black-cloth also forbids a woman's intellectual growth and darken her mind's compass. Thus this purdah of fine cloth extends to all aspects of her life and carries her to a finality of death without any substantial purpose of living." ⁷ (Nair 2014, 143)

In 'Purdah I', Dharker tries to convey different perceptions of 'purdah' by a Muslim girl at different stages of her life. In her early years, she finds it as a version of safety. In later years, during her teenage she is supposed to carry her signs of growth inside this purdah as 'a sense of sin'⁸. During adulthood, she experiences her rising desires and voices but they all seem to fall inwards. After an interview with Imtiaz Dharker, Aundhati Subramaniam says that, "Dharker's poetic journey is an interesting one to map. *Purdah* (1989), her first book, explored a somewhat interior politics through an exploration of the multiple resonances of the veil. The result was a work of rich texture and obliquity"⁹ (Hindu 2002). She puts in tremendous effort in the second half of the poem to reveal the anguish felt by Muslim women. With passing years, Muslim women are completely deprived of their identity and

individuality. They experience a continuous and distinct erosion of selfhood and originality. She asserts:

Passing constantly out of her own hands
into the corner of someone else's eyes...
while doors keep opening
inward and again
inward. ((Dharker 1989, 4)

They get introduced to the highest level of dependency on the patriarchal system. In a nutshell, Dharker projects how 'purdah' becomes an integral part of a Muslim woman's life, so much so that the veil which was felt as an external object in her initial years, later becomes such an inseparable part of her subjectivity that she feels incomplete without it. Prof. R. K. Bhushan says that "today, purdah is viewed as a flagrant violation of the basic rights, freedoms 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"¹⁰.

In the poem 'The Child Sings', Dharker has used very plain and uncomplicated words to highlight the agony and suffering faced by Muslim women. She draws a skillful contrast between an imaginative world of a child and the real world during adulthood. She points out that what a child plans and imagines, turns out to be aimless when she grows. Dharker compares adolescence to a 'door'¹¹ of hope through which new wishes and desires flow in the mind of a Muslim girl. But, as the poem progresses, the reader gets to know that the new horizons dreamt by the child were found 'draped in black'¹². She demonstrates by saying:

A door opens.
Light spills out
around her body,
Draped in black. (Dharker 1989, 31)

Dr. G. Baskaran & B. Kathiresan remark that, "here the woman is analogous to a helpless infant making unsuccessful attempts to sing but ends up only in babbles. The woman is raised to be sacrificed, her parent's and in-laws' fail to support her"¹³ (Baskaran and Kathiresan 2008, 32). Dharker concludes the poem by calling a Muslim woman a mere 'crack'¹⁴, which is so thin and insignificant where only darkness can find a place. She has underlined that Muslim women's life is full of darkness both in her personal arena and as a social being:

She is nothing but a crack
where the light forgot to shine. (Dharker 1989, 31)

Dharker's readers can easily comprehend her sensitivity and concern towards socio-political affairs in many of her poems. "A Woman's Place" is one such poem, which has clear demarcations of restricted social boundaries towards women. She discloses:

Mouths must be watched, especially
if you're a woman. A smile
should be stifled with the sari-end.
No-one must see your serenity cracked,
even with delight. (Dharker 1989, 32)

The poet asserts that continuous and consistent bearing, because of the social refrains and constraints, make Muslim women lifeless. They lose contact with their own selves after so many fake and socially bound pretentions. Through this poem, she points out that the only place given generously to women is 'fear'¹⁵, as they are always entirely encircled by social and God-fearing dogmas and perimeters. Thereby, she concludes the poem by saying -

Fear, you tell me, is a woman's place. (Dharker 1989, 34)

In her poem 'Another Woman', Dharker informs her readers about oppression of women after marriage and hints towards domestic violence. This poem protests against the

imprisonment of women inside the four walls and their treatment as mere commodities encased under religious orthodoxy. She depicts how Islamic culture has restricted the role of women to domestic domain only, without even giving her the right to speak. She manifests:

When the man came home
she did not look into his face
nor raise her head; but bent
her back a little more.
Nothing gave her the right
to speak. (Dharker 1989, 39)

Adulthood of women is confined to the family circle, so much so that patriarchal culture and traditions molest their actual identity. Eventually, they fail to recognize themselves after the daily course of household work and find a haunting image of 'Another Woman' in themselves who is entirely different from their real selves. These psychologically devastated women wonder that marriage, which should have brought new dreams and desires, has brought destruction of not just their aims and emotions but their identity too. This poem also sings silent murmurs of lawful second marriage of men which escorts and precipitates additional suffering for women. As Bruce King says, "The sequence ends not with emphasis on the husband bringing another woman home (although that happens), but on the way the wife has herself become 'Another Woman' from what she was after years of shopping for food in the market, counting 'her coins out carefully', cooking, facing her hostile mother-in-law, waiting for and on her husband, being alone."¹⁶ Nair states that, "Another woman is in the blaze. And the last line "We shield our faces from the heat" unambiguously expresses the lethargy that the society maintains against such gruesome acts of patriarchal violence. Such torpor is more detestable than even the violence."¹⁷ Dharker conveys it as:

So when the kerosene was thrown
(just a moment of surprise,

a brilliant spark)
it was the only choice
that she had ever known. (Dharker 1989, 39)

Male-dominance, gender-biased traditions, domestic violence, malice and wrath by husband and mother-in-law, and treatment of women as commodities, could not be expressed more skillfully in a single poem as Dharker has endeavoured.

Thus through *Purdah and Other Poems*, Dharker ignites a flame of revolutionary ideas as a first step towards the empowerment of women. She tries to bring awareness towards Muslim women's predicament by expressing their pain and suffering from various aspects. In this book, Dharker has created a mirror image of feminine sensibility through her poems, which reveal the presence of 'purdah' in various forms between a woman and her freedom. Here, 'purdah' symbolizes the various barriers and hurdles faced by women in their struggle against subjugation. She employs the word 'purdah' as a metaphor to disclose the suppression and injustice towards Muslim women. In a venture to highlight the orthodoxy and prejudice towards Muslim women, she summons alertness towards woman as a whole, thus endowing them with an urge to transform their lives.

END NOTES

1. "Imtiaz Dharker describes herself as a Scottish Muslim Calvinist, and it is this combination of seemingly irreconcilable differences that characterises both her poetry and her pencil work." (<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/imtiazdharke>)
2. "They have all been sold and bought, [...]" (Dharker 1989, 7)
3. Nair. 2014, 143.
4. "[...] on coffins after they put the dead men in." (Dharker 1989, 3)
5. "The cloth fans out against the skin [...]" (Dharker 1989, 3)

6. "The body finds a place to hide". (Dharker 1989, 3)
7. Nair. 2014, 143.
8. "[...] between the thighs, a sense of sin." (Dharker 1989, 3)
9. Subramaniam. 2002. (www.thehindu.com)
10. Bhushan. 2010.
(http://www.festivaldepoesiademedellin.org/en/Diario/05_01_10.html)
11. "A door opens". (Dharker 1989, 31)
12. "[...] draped in black". (Dharker 1989, 31)
13. Baskaran and Kathiresan. 2008, 32
14. "She is nothing but a crack [...]" (Dharker 1989, 31)
15. "Fear, you tell me, is a woman's place". (Dharker 1989, 34)
16. King. 2001, 323-324.
17. Nair. 2014, 145.

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