

**THE VOCABULARY OF SUBALTERN RESISTANCE:
A STUDY OF IMTIAZ DHARKER'S SELECTED POEMS**

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Abstract

The world and the literary tradition of the world is touching newer horizons and there are arising voices which call for socio-religious transformations and re-births. In spite of living in larger democracies, socially liberated environments and having come out of the orthodox religious clutches, there still remain things which need attention and a progressive outlook. The society which claims to be liberal, just and secular still lags behind in the execution of these principles. There are places even today where women are forced to bow down before the harsh religious laws. The present paper aims at exploring the concerns of the minority women communities taking into consideration the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker, a Muslim woman poet. The poet writes from a multiply marginalized point of view that of being women, being a Muslim and being a minority. Various laws which have orthodoxy as their base restrict the freedom of women and force them to either take extreme steps or surrender before the dictates of a male generated ideology. The paper aims at exploring the concerns, the main issues that she takes up through her poetry and the attitudes that need to be developed for addressing the issues.

Key words: *marginality, feminist, resistance, women, muslim, patriarchy, purdah, honour.*

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Encompassing one-third of world's population, the fourth-world pushes to the forefront issues and concerns of the marginalized, subaltern, the unregistered, the unattended and the unrecognized sections of communities. Ranging from the nations at large to the particular religious domains, people suffer owing to multiple reasons of discriminations or differences and women undoubtedly hold a larger share here also. Already existing as the subaltern, the voiceless, the unprivileged and unimportant, women because of particular religious, cultural and the traditional alignments suffer a larger share of disregard and subordination. The paper attempts at exploring the suffocation, the injustices and the restrictions suffered by a Muslim woman as voiced by Imtiaz Dharker through her poetry. It is not any particular religion itself which binds a human being but it is the institutional manipulation of the religion which leads the masses to havoc. The rigid laws as executed by men or the male religious leaders lead to a fragmented life of women. The interpretation of holy texts at the hands of men has at the very base a gendered bias and therefore, what gets propagated as reality are not facts but patriarchal interpretations of those facts. Various laws in the Islamic societies like that of purdah, honour killing, and early marriages confine women to the four walled domains and deprive them of their basic rights to live lives with freedom and grace. Dharker raises a voice against all these injustices in her poetry, thereby, calling for a re-birth of emancipated women and societies at large and a re-interpretation of laws.

Describing herself as a Scottish Muslim Calvinist, Imtiaz Dharker exists as a powerful poet, artist and a filmmaker. She was born in Pakistan, brought up in Scotland and married a Hindu. Her life experiences, therefore, remain varied and it is this variety that characterizes her poetry and art. Home, freedom, journeys, conflicts and gender biases remain as her main thematic concerns (Tiwari 87). Dharker's is a strong, staunch feminist voice which transgresses the set boundaries and challenges the dogmatic and orthodox organized Islamic culture. Through her poetry, she critiques the laws that are executed in the name of religion and in turn imprison women. The conditioning and the subordination that women are subjected to receives a comprehensive attention and exploration at the hands of Dharker.

Women are racing ahead in all kinds of fields...And yet there are women who don't even know they have Choices...The cases are in our newspapers every-day young girls abused within their own families....I do see all the bright young girls and the self-confident women around me... Of course, they are shining...and what I am saying is that I want all the others to shine too, to have the same opportunities. (Dharker, Women Shining: Online)

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Imtiaz Dharker emerged as a rebel at multiple levels- the personal level, the social level and the political level. There is a continuous strain of rebellion directed at the rigid principles which restrict and govern the lives of women. She blends her art and her experiences and presents through her poems the largely complex lives that women live or rather are forced to live (Bhushan, Online). Imtiaz Dharker makes a space among those women who because of the deprivation, conservative environments and a biased treatment take on to the poetic domain as the means of empowerment and use it to voice the concerns, the feelings and register a revolt against the patriarchy. In addition to gender, religion too acts as a powerful agency that governs the execution of the will of women. Poets like Fahmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed belong to this category of thoughts which exposes both religion and gender as the main factors responsible for the maltreatment and exploitation of women. Dharker highlights the role of religious communities, states and societies with regard to the execution of religious fundamentalism.

She began the attack by her volume of poetry, *Purdah and Other Poems*, which established her as a scathing and powerful feminist. The book is a collection of about twenty-five poems which expose various faces of the forces responsible for the subordinate position of women. Her collection *Purdah I* talks about the institution of veil as projected by many fundamentalists in Islam.

The poems in my new book, *Purdah*, started with almost seductive image of the veil and then began to suggest the complex ideas associated with it. (Dharker, sheer poetry Online)

In the orthodox Islamic societies veil is often used as a weapon to subjugate women. Dharker's poems, therefore, are emblematic of the injustices, the oppressions and the violence enforced through this culture. To her the meaning of purdah varies. It is according to her more of a mental subjugation than physical. It restricts the vision of a woman and acts as a barrier between her and the world outside. The existence of a woman is reduced to just being a sexual object and a body that requires covering. Dharker very openly registers a revolt against this institution and exposes the negative effects of this ideology. She relates it to a coffin which is used to cover a dead body saying that the way in which coffin covers up a dead body in the same way purdah covers a woman while she is alive. This revolt starts right from the beginning and then she gradually exposes the deadening connotations that it carries. She says:

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)

According to Imtiaz Dharker, purdah is the first force used to cultivate modesty among women. A muslim girl is right from the very beginning taught to cover herself and end up by becoming a wife and a mother. She becomes dependent on man for everything always waiting for him to save, protect and rescue her.

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)

The body is projected as something very sinful and this results in a conditioning within women because of which they become detached even from their own selves. A girl child is deprived of the very basic rights in certain societies. She is denied the freedom to choose and therefore her thoughts get sealed according to the community that she is born in. Her second collection of poems *Purdah II* exposes the harsh practices that are carried about by people in the name of religion in order to save their faces. The collection of poems represents the plight of two women Salima and Naseem who dare to cross the set bounds and end up in disaster.

Saleema had learnt from the films that the heroine was always pure and untouched. She surrendered herself to the passion of the mad old artist and wondered "*at her own strange wickedness.*" ...She is badly bowed under the burden of such a life. Naseem's elopement brought shame and disgrace to the family....Social, cultural and religious sanction and prescription this *purdah* is for the women in male-chauvinistic Muslim society. And how devastating it is to the female personality and psyche! (Bhushan, Online)

The very basic right to marry by choice is considered highly sinful in certain societies and as a result of this forced marriages take place resulting in utter unhappiness and further commoditization of women. *Purdah II* expresses the plight of all those women who break the rules and face brutality and punishment from the society.

"*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, 270-71)

Another issue that Dharker takes up is that of sexual exploitation. She comments upon the Islamic law where in a man is given the right to marry many times and to divorce a woman anytime he likes. She further states that women in turn are treated as slaves and commodities. Dharker criticizes the laws that confine a woman to the four walls of house and thereby calls for a re-interpretation.

They have all been sold and brought,

The girls I knew,

Unwilling virgins who had been taught,

Especially in this strangers' land, to bind

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Their brightness tightly round. (Dharker, 1989, 7)

In many muslim societies, the practise of honour killing exists even today. A girl is killed publically for a sin that she hasn't committed and stoning a woman to death is a highly condemnable act. It not only violates the sanctity of human existence but also reflects the bias that exists in such societies which never ask men about anything and punish a woman on the pretext of honour killing.

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 "HonourKilling." (Dharker, Online)

This practise has been taken note of by Dharker and in her poem the 'honour killing', she attempts to awaken the conscience of the masses who are otherwise laid powerless by implementation of such religious laws. She protests very bluntly against this religious law saying:

At last I am taking off this coat
This black veil of a faith
That made me faithless
That tied my mouth (Dharker, 2001, 13)

She strongly feels that women must voice themselves and protest against such deadening acts. R K Bhushan opines:

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. Initially the price may be high and the tragedy too deep for tears but it is earnestly desired for the freedom and happiness of the future generations of women suffocating and rotting in such an environment (Online).

In her another collection of poems, *I Speak for the Devil*, Dharker deals with the gender issues. She brings in all those women who revolt against the injustices, orthodoxy and in turn get labeled as freaks. She calls for a new start. After delving deep into the helplessness and the plight of women folk, she emphasizes the need to start afresh. She herself announces a departure from the norm, the traditions and the cultures rooted in orthodoxy. Her poem 'Monsoon Words' depicts the future that belongs to women only. She talks about the opportunities that would be available to them. All this is symbolized through a girl who runs on a road full of possibilities which were impossible earlier. Another poem of her 'Announcing the Arrival' exists as a harbinger of a new start wherein the speaker leaves behind her past and welcomes the future.

Look away and the rain will fall/ on to your mouth.../

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we belong in this time/ after all. (Dharker, 2001, 28)

The power of transformation, change and betterment lies vested with women and everything becomes possible for them. There is a sense of fulfillment, of freedom and of a complete independence. She denies anyone the right to make a claim over her. She doesn't care about the judgments, the comments, the stereotypes associated with women.

The hypocrites, the prudes / running our lives

With their holier-than-thou prissy attitudes

The bigots with offended sensibilities

The bastards..... (Dharker, 2001, 31)

Imtiaz Dharker as such isn't against the religions but what she protests and raises her voice against is the ideology which is propagated by men in the name of religion and the ideology which holds women as victims rather than offering them equal rights and choices. She takes on to the devil's voice in 'I speak for the devil' to raise her voice against the atrocities and expose the hypocrite religious leaders and their activities. In many of her poems like the 'Saviours' and the 'Guardians', she mocks the so called authorities on religion by calling them unholy and wearing masks of holiness:

It's hard to say

Who's on which side.

All the murderers are wearing/ Masks

With god's face painted on. (Dharker, 2001, 88)

She further says:

Strange how the guardians

Of our morals.....

Slither into juicy things

Where they don't belong. (Dharker, 2001, 88)

Dharker highlights the hollowness of religions, the loss of actual divinity, faith and devotion. Therefore, she calls upon every woman to challenge these constructed ideas of

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religion, claim a space of her own and deny the status that is granted to her by others. What she aims at is a life free from bondages, restrictions, prescriptions of society, religion and culture.

I'm letting all the bad things
Fall away, I'm no one
But myself
No one possesses me. (Dharker, 2001, 127)

Imtiaz Dharker has emerged on the scene as a spokesperson for all those women who are weighed down with the baggage of customs, traditions and cultures. In spite of the emancipation, freedom and the choice to act that the contemporary women claim to have, there remain certain issues underneath which lay an unconsciously negative impact upon the psyche of women. Rejecting the male canon and creating a space for themselves to voice, the contemporary women have undoubtedly altered the ways of thinking. However, there still remain efforts that need to be made in order to bring out women from every section of the society on the road to emancipation. They need to write and to speak about their suppressed selves. They need to free themselves from the shackles of conventions. There is a need to use the subalternity as a source of empowerment and transform the world in order to see and understand women from the prism of equality and justice.

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