

Imtiaz Dharker's "Purdah": Unveiling Womanhood and Understanding of the Self

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When we look at Indian culture and its history, the shadow of the colonial impact still lingers. The stain runs so deep that we seem to have absorbed and embraced the colonial values and mindset as our own. For many decades, women would knock around in the dark, like blind, unable to see, and therefore, unable to drink from rivers that run in our own backyards. Modernization, education, urbanization, and similar factors helped women to break free from these shackles and find their true calling in life. Poetry in English by women writers is part of the transformation and reconstruction of Indian society, including its participation in a global system of education and economics, which has replaced the older colonial and imperial networks.

Another issue taken over by modern society is how the term 'traditional' is often taken as a disguise for gaining or maintaining power over women whenever faced with the liberating effects of democracy, education, and urbanization. According to traditionalists, 'Sita' should be the model for women, but there are many versions of the Ramayana some of which are even taken as feminist. Traditions are what you make of them.

Breaking the age old traditions and orthodox manners of the society, Imtiaz Dharker, one of the few poets from Muslim background, lives with the passion of an undaunted rebel: not to retreat and not to fail. She was born in 1954 in Lahore, Pakistan, grew up in Glasgow, and moved to Bombay after marriage with Anil Dharker. She lived in Bombay for about two decades before moving to England. She is an established poet, artist, and film maker. Her poetry showcases a tight control over language and emotion. It is marked by an expression that marries beauty with strength. The intensity and eloquence of her life and poetic accomplishment which is consciously feminist, consciously political, and consciously that of a multiple outsider, have dumb founded the male chauvinists on one hand and have left her female counterparts in soaring spirits not only inside the Islamic social, cultural, and religious set-up but also outside it, on the other. Her life and poetry make a fascinating study in the crushing indictment of the suppressive prescriptions against the freedom, dignity, and respectful living of women, especially in the Muslim society.

Imtiaz Dharker belongs to that generation of post-independence women poets who have given a convincing assurance that the Indian English Poetry matches the best anywhere. She has not only broadened the thematic concerns of Indian English Poetry but has also shown how words and images – simple, suggestive, and highly evocative – can recite the music of their anguish and agony, their irritations and humor, their observations and reflections with no sign of pretension. This serious and well considered response to the observed and loved experiences is a drama of daily life here and there poeticized. The lived experiences of Imtiaz have been honestly expressed in her poetry with conviction. Her humanistic and feministic concerns with her anguish and agony, sympathy and protest give the message silently, though its deafening explosion has been felt everywhere. That is the reason

that her rebellion has caused a flutter in the petticoats of the guardians of orthodox religion, custodians of cultures and the petty fogging politicians.

Dharker's quiet rebellion especially with regards to the position and treatment of women in the Muslim society can be seen in her *Purdah* poems which were published in 1989. She sees the 'purdah' as an agency of patriarchal control, a 'shroud' that suffocates and makes its wearer feel exiled, emotionally marooned, and ultimately a social misfit – a castaway. The practice of purdah in many Asian countries is not merely a form of dress or custom, but is indicative of a whole social system. Purdah strengthens the idea of female subordination inbuilt in patriarchal societies; it also defines family and political structures and constitutes the basis of gender ideology. It has many subtle forms and dress is the most superficial and the most visible of these. Ideologically, purdah is the oldest form of colonization, of domination, and of control. So it is the female body which acquired the metaphor of land which needs to be controlled and hence female bodies become what Foucault calls "docile bodies" (25). So, her first volume, *Purdah*, centers on a major cultural value of her inherited religion. It is quite apt to see how the holy book Koran mentions the following instructions to the prophet:

"O Prophet: Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, that so they may be recognized and not annoyed....." (qtd. in Lateef, 258)

But Dharker looks at the world through the eyes of an intelligent and sensitive Muslim woman, reacting to her experience in different ways, in different moods because she herself says, "There are many of me" (qtd in Jain, 244). So, she finds different meanings in purdah at different times. It is "a kind of safety/ the body finds a place to hide" but then it is safety of the tomb (Dharker, "Purdah I", 50). When you are in a purdah, people you have known "make different angles/ in the light their eyes aslant/ a little sly." It is, in fact, a symbol of religious, moral, and social taboos, which a spirited young woman would like to break; but worst of all is the "Purdah of the mind" (Roy 88-89). One may argue that the poet's employment of the purdah motif could merely be metaphoric and allude to personal landscapes of the poet who happens to be well educated and a well privileged member of elite society like The Bombay Circle. However, it cannot be overlooked that in the hands of Imtiaz Dharker the purdah becomes an agency of intense patriarchal control, brutally violating all norms of individual freedom and expression. The 'purdah,' in other words, is a piece of cloth that shrouds a woman's world. Under the guise of protection the limiting folds of hijab isolate the protagonist, contrive a complete erasure of identity, and eventually lead to a state of trauma and a living death.

Imtiaz Dharker, as a painter and film maker, laments the lack of freedom and opportunity to women. She uses her poetry and visual art as a tool to unveil all those women who are relegated only to hearth and home, and subjected to ceaseless mental and physical harassment and agony by obliterating chauvinistic male hegemonic influence. Although her focus is more on the Muslim women but her vehement denunciation and scathing outburst against institutionalized victimization of women is inclusive of all women in general.

Dharker has an instinct for images. Her poems have both an argumentative and dramatic structure; in examining the personal she becomes universal. So in "Purdah I," she takes the settings from specifics of Muslim culture, specifics that are criticized but it is also seen as a metaphor for the way women confine themselves into shells to remain safe from disapproval and harm. It is a condition of the mind under social pressure and stress and finally one loses a sense of being true to oneself.

One day they said
She was old enough to learn some shame.

She found it came quite naturally.

Purdah is a kind of safety. (Dharker 50)

Purdah is dissociation from one's own self, where 'she' is doing what is expected rather than what she feels and this is the result of the shame she has been taught early on about her gender and sexuality:

She half remembers things

From someone's else's life,

Perhaps from yours or mine –

Carefully carrying what we do not own:

Between the thighs, a sense of sin.

"Purdah II" interweaves Dharker's own conflicts between the comforts of a Muslim identity, based on how she was brought up and the actuality of studying the Koran. Even in studying the Koran there was sexuality:

The new Hajji . . . , There was nothing holy in his look. (Dharker, "Purdah 2", 51)

At the heart of the problem is female sexuality. Dharker strongly criticizes the way Muslim women are treated by the so-called masters of the culture. These cultures and customs are intensified with the Diasporas. While women are viewed as slaves and commodities, the worst effect is on their spirits, the falseness between what women feel and what they are allowed to show, the distance between them and their social selves. Culture uses shame to repress female sexuality and the independence of spirit which is a part of it.

They have all been sold and bought,

The girls I knew,

Unwilling virgins who had been taught,

Especially in 'this strangers' land, to bind

Their brightness tightly round,

Whatever they might wear,

In the purdah of the mind.

'Purdah' is based on the principle of inequality and establishes itself on the dual strategy of control and exclusion. It defines space action and relationships. In monotheistic religions like Islam, the blame for the fall is attributed to woman who engineered the great catastrophe. So she must be kept at an arm's length so that the basic instincts of man are not aroused. The device was contrived to ensure their instantaneous recognition, an outcaste as if they were. It practically cordons off a woman's personality from the outside world. Apparently purdah has been designed for a woman's safety which is most vulnerable. In "The body finds a place to hide," we can assume that 'she' is all body and nothing else (Dharker, "Purdah 1", 50). It can also be viewed in:

The cloth fans out against the skin

Much like the earth that falls

On coffins after they put the dead men in.

Purdah's comparison with coffin communicates the deadening impact of this custom on the soul of the woman who is allocated a burial treatment while she is alive.

Another aspect that Imtiaz Dharker bemoans is the lack of proper education among Muslim women to make them independent. Here purdah acts as a wall between the women and the world. The result is that she is devoid of the first-hand experience and the enlightenment this world has to offer her. Dharker raises the curtain on the atrocities Muslim women or the women are subjected to by patriarchy – the way they are educated just to recite the Holy book mechanically without understanding its subtlety and meanings, the way they are turned out to be child-producing machine as her religion prohibits the use of contraceptives.

Besides subordination by domestication, Dharker objects to Muslim women's total exclusion from religious ceremonies and prayers in some of her poems like "Grace" and "Prayer." One feels annoyed that a woman's biology is regarded as her Achilles' heel to enter a mosque. Imam spits out her contempt as if she is a non human creature:

A woman comes
With her eyes concealed
She trails the month behind her,
We are defiled. (Dharker, "Purdah 2", 51)

In Imtiaz Dharker's views religious upbringing plays a significant role in conceptual frame work. Since the life of a woman is more regimented in Islam, so her resentment against patriarchy is pointed, incisive, and perspicacious. But it is not only religion or Islamic culture, it is also relationships, love, marriage, motherhood, ageing which turns a woman down into submission, being false to herself, into mental purdah. The split of identity among the subject (women) and the subjectifying categories (men) brings one to an understanding of how the 'Self' gets defined and limited in the presence of the 'Other' and how it reconstitutes itself. The personae in Dharker's *Purdah* have arrived at this "decentered understanding of the 'Self'" (Roy 89).

In the dead world of the doomed the poet tries to create breathing space for woman. In a sudden shift of stances the subject takes the position of the subjectifier and constitutes the identity of the other 'they' or men:

They make different angles
in the light their eyes aslant
a little sly. (Dharker, "Purdah 1", 50)

She sees and she recognizes them. Through this act, she not only constitutes them from a different perspective but also forms a new identity for herself. She recognizes what she has to be protected from, the "sly", "aslant" eyes. In this way, the distinction between the victimizer and the protector blurs. The breakdown of these categories becomes the opening of a search for new possibilities – the little chink from where the expanse of 'beyond' will open up.

Memory forms another structure holding her from the point from where her presence begins. She has been allotted a veiled, unindividuated body as the total space which too is infested with sin "between the thighs" and she is carrying it forward very carefully from the collective conscious of the other women. The individual memories of the torments of womanhood are not transmitted into the collective unconscious or an undifferentiated stream of the culture but remain fragmented, specific, and hence conscious and haunting.

The vigilance of patriarchy through the collective unconscious-culture and the conscious memory by now is complete leaving no space for dream, desire, and drive. The present, both of time and space is suffocating. Only heterotopia can release from this trap. Hence the process of breaking bounds has already begun in her perception along with reconstitution of the other and the 'Self.' She has started breaking the barriers of a definition and stands outside. She distances herself from the four corners of the room and scratches for a hold between Adam's first and the second rib. Life appears to be coming with a new lease. The sea of freedom has been opening up.

Doors keep opening
inward and again
inward.

"Purdah II" also reflects the backdrop of religion which is termed a "coin of comfort rattling against the strangeness of land".⁸ Religion is a manifestation of man's desire for power and as such a myth sustaining patriarchy. It limits, restricts, and intimidates women. They must hide themselves. In religion also hiding their physicality is essential as they are visible physically only, their spirituality is neither evidenced nor acknowledged in this myth-making which takes place through religion. But release does come and it comes by way of transformation of the "coin of comfort into the coin of freedom." The resultant experience of rebellion is diverse, varied, and even frustrating at times. It is, nevertheless, a lived experience. They are no longer an imagined community. The look that sees them with a slant or sly eye can no longer hold them.

Hence freedom for the personae of Dharker's poems may not bring relief but it does bring the freedom of choices and of will. So, in a nutshell, we can say that the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker is an inimitable blend of simplicity and spontaneity. Her poetry, to use Wordsworth's words is a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.' Attacking on the prescriptive religion, Dharker conveys her message very beautifully creating an atmosphere of purity, freshness, and innocence.

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