



A Saga of Feminine Life: Search for Space and Sanctuary in the Select Poems of Imtiaz Dharker

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Abstract

Imtiaz Dharker is an expatriate writer who 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. Her carefully gauged words along with her evocative drawings convey the various human predicaments and issues that throttle human beings especially women in the course of their existence. The present study strives to trace the struggle a woman undertakes to achieve progress from the imposed restrictions towards self-realization, seeking an abode that promises hope. With this objective, some of Dharker's poems namely Purdah, They'll say, "she must be from another country", Tow Path and Living Space have been selected for scrutiny. These poems uncloak brilliantly how a woman's life takes transformation from a veiled existence into that of self actualization which drives her to find a sanctuary of her choice.

Key Words: Marginalization, Male Chauvinism, Second sex, Purdah, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Indian poetry has witnessed different phases in the process of its growth, reflecting the prominent issues of the time, voicing against social injustices and upholding the welcoming changes of the country and the world. Imtiaz Dharker is a promising voice in the Indian English Poetry who has addressed the throttling issues of her sex and time which are both political and social. She is an expatriate writer who was born in Lahore and at present she divides her time between Glasgow and Mumbai. She has found an entry into the domain of Indian English poetry with the collection of poems titled *Purdah*. Her carefully gauged words along with her evocative

drawings convey the various human predicaments and issues that smother human beings especially women in the course of their existence. However, it should be said in her favour that she is not a poet who has only very obnoxious things to convey to her readers. Besides painting the startling and ugly realities of the power centered society, she tries to impart courage and confidence by articulating that these negative forces can equip one especially a woman to draw courage to struggle against these discriminatory forces. Through her poems, Dharker also accentuates the need to find her own space and sanctuary in the society. This paper endeavours to communicate this essential and encouraging thought for a feminine life for which Dharker's poems "Purdah1", "They'll say, "she must be from another country", "Tow Path" and "Living Space" are selected for study. These chosen poems have helped to trace the different struggling phases of a woman's life which can take her to the destination.

The poem "Purdah1" which is taken from the first poetry collection of Dharker titled *Purdah and Other Poems* commences with the statement of the marginal status of a woman. Women are generally considered as the "second sex" across the globe. More so is the status of Muslim women. Being a Muslim woman, Dharker could authentically pronounce the problems of her sect in her poems which unveil the injustice done to the human beings in the name of gender. Once a Muslim girl or any girl for that matter grows up, she is looked down upon by the male-chauvinistic society who considers her to be "old enough to learn some shame" (Purdah1). Disgrace comes on her way "quite naturally" (14). She feels her vulnerability and as Dharker presents she clings on to the purdah, the black robe as a source to hide herself. 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" (Singh 46). 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.

“Purdah1” 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. It will only teach her to look “aslant” and to be “sly” (14). It gradually makes her withdraw into herself, segregating her from the society and coerces her for a cloistered existence which ultimately leads her to overbear “a sense of sin” (14) for being born a woman. Such discriminating thoughts let the cloak to grow completely and engulf her body. However, Dharker feels that the inner self of every woman has a light that filters inward and forges her to come out of the veil. The initial attempt to pull it out within the four walls of the room may be difficult and she will feel highly insecure and the purdah may seem to

inching past herself
as if she were a clod of earth
and the roots as well,
scratching for a hold (Purdah1).

The above lines unfailingly underscore the discriminating pulls of her society which does not entertain her self being brought to light. The belief of the patriarchal society is that “women’s bodies are a source of sin or temptation, they must be controlled or covered, and women’s movements or locations ... must be curtailed” (Scholz 104)) Hence, it threatens her with its intimidating looks and she yields to it as she feels that when she comes out of her black veil, she is caught “into the corner of someone else’s eyes...” that compels her to open the doors that quite astonishingly open “inward and again inward” (14).

Dharker’s second poem selected here for study, “They’ll say ‘she must be from another country’” from the collection *I Speak for the Devil* shows a shift in the mental state of the poet or a woman. Here, a woman shows the dare to come out of her strangling cloistered pardah life. However, Dharker forewarns that it may not be an encouraging enterprise. What a woman may encounter in the present society is admiringly disclosed by this poetess. She shows how one is intimidated by the strange ways of her chaotic society which takes delight in afflicting the weak and destroying things. So she laments “I can’t comprehend” why people are taken to destroying things and when she raises her voice against this atrocity “They just smile and say,/ She must be

from another country.” (They’ll say). The patriarchal society reiterates that she has no right to question its ways. The poet laments:

When I speak ...
and the vowel sounds are off
when the consonants are hard
and they should be soft,
they’ll catch on at once
they’ll pin it down
they’ll explain it right away
to their own satisfaction,
they’ll cluck their tongues
and say,
‘She must be
from another country’. (They’ll say)

Such marginalizing words of the society turn her into a freak. Too much of restrictions and withdrawal finally result in developing the nerve to defy and renounce the ways of the society. She dares to choose her own life unmindful of the criticism that she is an alien and misfit. The meaningless existence brings within the poetess a longing for a society

where all of us live,
all of us freaks
who aren’t able to give
our loyalty to fat old fools,
the crooks and thugs
who wear the uniform
that gives them the right
to wave a flag,
puff out their chests,
put their feet on our necks,
and break their own rules. (They’ll say)

Such a defiant thought drives Dharker to renounce the present world saying that “it doesn’t look like a country” (They’ll say). She confesses to Pinto in this context that it “seems far too spelt-

out, far too enunciated. “I wanted it to be rough,” she explains. “I wanted it to be angry. I wanted to write a rabble-rousing poem and this is as rabble-rousing as I can get.” (Imtiaz Unbound 2004). Hence, she fills her poetic canvas with these fiery words:

And I'll be happy to say,
'I never learned your customs.
I don't remember your language
or know your ways.
I must be from another country.' (They'll say)

These words of Dharker prove that she is one of the modern women who dares to “break such taboos by expressing their points of view and speaking their minds in quite bold and at times brazen tones” (Singh 49).

Another poem of Dharker chosen here for scrutiny titled “Tow Path” encourages and ensures about the possibility of self-empowerment these bitter experiences can bring on its way. Here, she describes the expedition that one undertakes to reach the destination. Exposure to the outside world and constant struggle bring in a distinct change in the attitude of the poetess who begins to have some hope about her future. From her spiteful experiences, she regains a vigour that empowers her to face the unpredictable ways of life and so she pens, “Every step we take/ could have been a step /in another direction” (Tow Path). Yet, she is aware that women may be forsaken by others for defying the age-old traditional cultural norms, but they should proceed overlooking the fact that their feet are left lonely. What they see and encounter might be puzzling. Their path won't be strewn with flowers. There will be many hurdles but they should undertake the journey unmindful of the impediments on their way for

Still, between the cobbled banks,
cradled by bare branches.
we know we will be safe.
Now, even the unknown path
will tow us home. (Tow Path)

These promising words of the poetess instil courage and offer solace to the souls who are struggling to reach their destination. However, Dharker does not want to mislead her readers who might dream about a perfect home which promises all the comforts.

Dharker's "Living Space" looms large over the kind of abode these women may finally arrive at. She is a pragmatic woman who is aware of the difficulties of this earthly abode. Her concept is never a Utopian home but rather a home that may collapse any moment. It is a home where

Nothing is flat
or parallel. Beams
balance crookedly on supports
thrust off the vertical.
Nails clutch at open seams.
The whole structure leans dangerously
towards the miraculous. (Living Space)

The sketch which the poet herself has drawn at the backdrop of the poem gives the very clear picture of the dilapidated state of the house. Yet, one can notice a person has made it her abode and has dared to hang a basket of eggs in this house. These eggs symbolically stand for the human lives which can break anytime. In spite of that, they like the eggs put up a propitious face that they can survive by emitting white rays "as if they were the bright thin walls of faith" (Living Space).

Dharker's seminal poem "Living Space" is undoubtedly a philosophical poem that reflects the unpredicted and unaccomplished state of human life especially women's lives which may collapse any minute. Despite its shortcomings, it allures one to live happily and Dharker feels if a woman wants her life to be meaningful, she should equip herself to put on a struggle which demands undaunted spirit and faith in oneself.

Thus, with the view that any work of art should positively inspire the society, an attempt has been made to explore in the select poems of Dharker the different phases of a woman's life which at the initial stage may divulge symptoms of withdrawal into the traditional veil fearing rejection but gradually it triggers her to search for an identity and meaning. Her poems emphasize the highly philosophical thought that a woman's life is an endless tale of struggle. It urges her for an expedition which in its course brings in a lot of obstacles. However, Dharker promulgates that one should not yield to these obstructions; on the other hand, should try to possess a daring spirit which will ultimately lead her to a sanctuary which though imperfect and inadequate may provide some meaningful 'living space'.

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