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Thematic Aspects of *Purdah-I*: Unveiling the Purdah of Religious and Social Orthodoxy

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Abstract:

Imtiaz Dharker (1954) born in Pakistan is a poet-cum-artist and one of Britain's most inspirational contemporary poets. She began her poetic career with *Purdah* and other Poems (1989) which establishes her reputation as a staunch feminist. In my paper, I have discussed *Purdah – I* poem in an endeavour to unveil the purdah of religious and social orthodoxy. Her poetry reveals the suppression of women by societal force. She knows that the condition of women nowadays has changed a lot, but she wants to work for the upliftment of those who still constitute the major part and are still suffering. Despite being educated and financially independent, they have fractured identity with suppressed desires, pain and suffocation and have no voice of their own. The present paper starts with *Purdah – I* poem and shows how *Purdah* apart from a veil of body becomes a “state of mind”. Dharker articulates women's helplessness, their pains, problems and fears, their victimization through her poetry and aims at hopeful liberalization of women in future.

Keywords: **Suppression, Fractured Identity, Suppressed desires, Suffocation, Victimization, liberalization, Social orthodoxy.**

Imtiaz Dharker (1954) born in Pakistan is a poet-cum-artist and one of Britain's most inspirational contemporary poets. She was brought up in Glasgow, Scotland and moved to India after her marriage with an Indian, Anil Dharker. After the death of her first husband, she moved to London and married to a Welshman, Simon Powell, the founder of “Poetry Live”, and presently resides there. She is familiar with being alone in a crowd: in Britain she was a believing Muslim, in India, a patriarchal environment, a woman of strong will. But the achievement of her poems in *Purdah* lies in her ability to disrobe feminism of its stridency. It is

this varied cultural experience that characterises her poetry and drawings. It is from this life of constant change that the themes of Imtiaz Dharker's poetry are drawn: childhood, freedom, gender politics, exile, journeying, home, religious strife, geographical and cultural displacement. She has not only broadened the thematic concerns of Indian English poetry but also shown how words and images simple, suggestive & highly evocative can recite the music of their anguish and agony, their irritations and humour, their observations and reflections with no sign of pretension.

Apart from technical excellence, the pain and poignancy endured in suffocation and suppression have found a justifiable outlet in her creative instinct. She confirms our convictions that socio-cultural and sociol-religious restrictions on women have robbed them of all their potentialities leaving them not only physically and mentally handicapped but also psychological wrecks age after age. The lived experiences of Imtiaz have been honestly expressed in her poetry with the courage of conviction. Her poetry reveals the suppression of women by societal forces – cultural, religious& political and force them through physical, mental& psychological trauma. The delicacy and the tenderness that run in her silky strains awaken us to the wrongs and songs of the daily life of women who are exploited by the patriarchal society for power dynamics. She knows that the condition of women nowadays has changed a lot, but she wants to work for the upliftment of those who still constitute the major part and are still suffering. Despite being educated and financially independent, they have fractured identity with suppressed desires, pain and suffocation and have no voice of their own. The present paper starts with the Purdah-I poem and shows how Purdah apart from a veil of body becomes a “state of mind”.

Imtiaz Dharker began her poetic career with *PURDAH AND OTHER POEMS* (1989) which establishes her reputation as a staunch feminist. With the rise of feminism and its becoming a worldwide rage, Purdah is seen in new light and new perspectives. However, purdah has greater socio cultural and socio-religious association for Muslim women, educated or uneducated, advanced or backward.

Obviously, Purdah was necessary in the beginning of Islam but the meaning associated with purdah has been changing in the changing times. The purdah which was a security once now is viewed as violating the dignity and feelings as it veils the personality or individuality of the women. As Virginia Woolf in her ‘A Room of One's Own’ also says that “it is better to be locked out than to be locked in” (Woolf, 1977). Dharker sensitizes women that men not only

lock them out of the patriarchal society and its functions but also lock them in the boundaries created for them. Purdah prevents woman from exercising her freedom as an individual as well as her experience of life. It also restricts her vision of the world. It also stands as a metaphor for the way women seek refuge and retreat into shells to be safe from harm and disapproval. The social pressure and stress makes one lose a sense of being true to oneself.

In the beginning of poem 'Purdah – I', Dharker has created a picture of a young girl who has just entered into her adolescence.

One day they said

She was old enough to learn shame

She found it came quite naturally. (Dharker, 2006)

At the threshold of youth, she attracts the attention of people around her. In a Muslim society, it is very important for a girl to preserve her modesty and honour. In Islam unlike in any other religion, the purdah is a device to protect the sanctity of the girl, and as a tool to check the arousing desires in the minds of male folks. It is a purdah which makes a woman believe that she is a sexual organ and should not tempt men in anyway. Purdah denotes the sense of shame and inferiority about her body as if being born as a female, she has committed a heinous crime. This veil – a symbol of orthodox imposition on a woman to hide what's shameful or outrageous – is a preoccupying theme in her poems. The onset of puberty signifies the end of an innocent world for a woman. The conservative society, cautious and conscious, must teach her some manners, decorum and dignity for the women in the purdah.

It is well supported by the Hadith of the Prophet Mohamed:

Prophet (PBUH) said "O Asma when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it doesn't suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to her face and hands".

(Abu Dawud, Book 32, No. 4092)

Though society interprets purdah as a tool to secure the physical body and provides safety from prying eyes but Dharker objects to the veil as she considers it more mental than physical. She uses a wonderful image where in she says: -

Purdah is a kind of safety

The body finds a place to hide

The cloth fans out against the skin

Much like the earth falls

On coffins after they put the dead men in. (Dharker, 2006)

Our attention is focused on the turning point in the life of a Muslim girl when she suddenly becomes conscious of her sexual growth, others are perhaps more conscious. They started discussing among themselves about her physical features. They started saying that she should learn shame. She feels strongly about Khandani izzat (family honour) and women have been carrying this burden of accumulated shame. Her whole existence on this earth is considered as a symbol of lust and nothing else and that is why she needs a covering so as to hide herself. Here is a meditation about the imposition of the veil on a young woman and her consequent loss of contact with the world. (Hughes, 2006 online)

Dharker revolts against the veil or purdah because she knows that the security is not always of the cocoon or the foetus, but also of the prison cell, or worse, a shroud. It may protect, but it also destroys. This seclusion which is an act of building a cocoon around oneself, according to her, is “the interior colonization”, reducing the women to a walking corpse. Purdah is a symbol of alienation & isolation from the outside world and acts as a wall between woman and the world. Purdah is designed by patriarchal society to suppress women so that they do not demand their independence and in a way keep up the legacy of superiority of men to themselves.

She compares the cloth fanned out against the skin with earth falling on coffins. The image of earth covering coffins is like cutting them off from the world and the person covered is made mute, deaf like a dead body in the coffin. Veil leads to limiting opportunities of learning and enlightenment leading to the death of intellect just as earth covers the dead. Purdah is nothing but the burial of the living dead. Purdah is considered here as coffin for women who are given a burial treatment while alive. It is just like a murder committed deliberately of the self within the dead body. The ‘Black’ colour of Purdah symbolically denotes lack of light and knowledge i.e. light of happiness and knowledge in life. They are denied education and opportunities in life and act as a tool to veil the identity or individuality of women. Thus, purdah brings with it deathly silence to accept the social and traditional norms and also expresses death of identity of an individual. It is “a symbol of moral, religious and social taboo” (Chaudhary, 2006: 173-74). Dharker is rebellious about the dehumanization of women in the orthodox society. She objects to the veil as she considers it more mental than physical.

The poet further says that, she half-remembers things from other people's life. It is the society that decides her identity, her roots. And she is seen through the lens of conservative society. It makes her feel ashamed of being a woman. If a girl transformed into a woman tries to find out her own identity, she is shunned down in society. The following lines express that it is a purdah which makes a woman believe that first she is a sexual organ and last a human being.

She half remembers things

From someone else's life,

Perhaps from yours, or mine –

Carefully carrying what we do not own:

Between the thighs, a sense of sin. (Dharker, 2006)

They have been taught to be 'ashamed' of their bodies. As a female, she has no choice but to accept it as a 'sin' and inflicts a 'guilt conscious' (Pandey, 1999: 47-58). This also points the onset of menstrual cycle during the adolescent period when a girl attains puberty. The sense of sin and shame is hammered into every woman's mind from an early age because now she becomes ready as a sexual object to be tempted by male folks.

..the situation which girls face in the world may be different. It implies that when the world (especially the male gaze) starts seeing her as an object, the girl ought to respond by taking recourse to Purdah.... since the girl is seen by the world as a woman. (Sawian, 2010)

So the poem presents how people's ideas about females become part of their identity and soon they begin to see their lives and the outside world through the glass of society. Dharker says: -

"The girl is able to distance her personality from her physical state and consider herself as a subject, in doing so, she realizes how heavily dependent she is on the patriarchal structures, that govern social norms and conventions..... Thus, she is constantly engaged in the situation and the world around her". (Sawian, 2010)

A light filters inward

Through our bodies' walls.

Voices speak inside us,

Echoing in the spaces we have just left.

She stands outside herself,

Sometimes in all four corners of a room." (Dharker, 2006)

Still a light of optimism filters inward through the wall like bodies. Voices speak inside us conveys that after all she is a human being, not an object of sexual gratification. She can also have her own opinions and assert herself in all four corners of a room though in the 'corners' only as she is a marginalized lot and can never attain the cardinal position in the society and the homes. Thus, she becomes very strong and clear and comes out of suffering soul and stands outside herself. Now the speaker speaks for 'us' and says that even after all this 'voices speak inside us.'

Wherever she goes, she is always

Inching past herself,

As if she were a clod of earth

And the roots as well,

Scratching for a hold between

The first and second rib

Passing constantly out of her own hands

Into the corner of someone else's eyes....(Dharker, 2006)

Through this wonderful image, she calls herself as clod of earth or root which firmly roots inside the soil, a dying tree (as she is a body only devoid of her own existence & personality who cannot speak up or assert her own self) whose roots struggle to balance and withstand. She has an inner self which is extremely rebellious and creates her own space. The female protagonist here tries to seek comfort in prayer, but to her utter horror, she finds that religion offers no solace. 'The first and second rib' has religious significance. There is reference to Christianity-woman is considered to be created out of man's rib and thus is given secondary treatment. The alienated subject experiences herself as the creation of another's gaze.

While doors keep opening

Inward and again

Inward. (Dharker, 2006)

And the doors opening inward and again inward reveal her seclusion and also symbolises the search for something. That search could be of that imaginary or utopian world where women would not be a commodity but treated as human beings. And she emerges as a new woman like the phoenix who is born out of her own ashes. She is now free to live her life in her own ways and has absolute freedom to attain new heights without any crutches. She should not become a

victim of oppressive structures and not forced to depend on men to save and rescue her from her plight.

Dharker articulates women's helplessness, their pains, problems and fears, their victimization through her poetry and aims at hopeful liberalization of women in future. Even a Pakistani Urdu poet, Israr-ul-haq Majaz (1911-1950), raises his voice against the Purdah system in the poem "The veil and honour" (Purdah aur Ismat) as: -

It would be better if you shrugged off this wicked veil.....

This scarf that covers you is beautiful indeed

It would be better if you converted it into a banner of revolt. (Ahmad, 1991)

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