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A Cry against Religious Orthodoxy in Imtiaz Dharker's Poetry

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Imtiaz Dharker (b.1954), a poet-cum-artist, has published five books of poetry. Accompanied by an exhibition of drawings her poetry confronted the theme of suppression of women by societal forces--cultural, religious and political. Having both literal and metaphorical connotations, her poetry captures the heart of every woman as her exposure to the western world develops in her a cosmopolitan outlook, and enables her to present the woes and sufferings of women not only in Islam but throughout the world in different cultures, with a deeper sense of involvement and consciousness. Her rebellion against deeply entrenched and organised religious values creates a dynamic feministic voice in Indian English poetry. The present paper starts with the *Purdah* poems and how *Purdah* apart from a veil of the body becomes a "state of mind", it ends with the 'Devil' poems where Dharker successfully leaves behind all the vicious forces which become a barrier in her individual freedom and development. As religion figures out to be main subject of critical analysis in Dharker's poetry, its unjust practices particularly against women are discussed in detail.

Imtiaz Dharker, (b.1954) a poet, artist and documentary film maker, describes herself as a "Scottish Muslim Calvinist" as she was born in Pakistan, 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. It is this varied cultural experience that characterises her poetry and drawings. Accompanied by drawings, she has published five books of poetry, *Purdah And Other Poems* (1989), *Post Cards From God* (1997), *I Speak For The Devil* (2001), *The Terrorist At My Table* (2009), and *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009) in which she mainly deals with themes like home, freedom, journeys, communal conflict and gender politics.

Dharker's all poetic works has a strong characteristic feature of 'Transmediality' as her works are illustrated by her own drawings/visual art. Thus there is a transmedial exchange between these two art forms which influence each other. In an interview with Jerry Pinto she admits:

'Sometimes a poem can start with an idea and that can in turn spark off a drawing.' For years, she says, she kept her engagements with these two arts apart. Now they have fallen into each other. Poet and art critic Ranjit Hoskote has called them 'poems amplified by drawings' to which Imtiaz only wants to add, 'drawings amplified by poems'. (Pinto, 2004 Online)

Thus in case of Dharker we can only understand the complex ideas/meaning attached to her poems if we approach her works transmedially, since there is strong connection between her poems and drawings.

She raises her voice against the orthodox ways in which Islam is interpreted and followed. Born and brought up in a traditional Muslim family, she protests against the rigid principles of Islam which imprison a woman in the four walls of the home. By marrying a non-Muslim, she violated one of the basic tenets of Islam and revealed her experiences of being made

subordinate through her poetry. Her rebellion, particularly against the position and treatment of women in Muslim society functions as a slap in the face of organized religious orthodoxy.

She belongs to that category of feminist women poets, like Gauri Deshpande, Eunice-de-Souza, Fahmida Riyaz and Kishwer Naheed (Urdu feminist poets) et al, who raise their voice against an increasingly hostile and male-dominated social and cultural context. Bruce King has rightly introduced her as:

Someone as distinct in her own way as Mamta Kalia, Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza.....consciously feminist, consciously political, consciously that of a multiple outsider, someone who knows her own mind rather than someone full of doubt and liberal ironies. (King,2001:321).

Her poetry deals with the major cultural values of her religion and forcefully expresses her concern for humanistic and feministic values. Her poetry is not only confined to women's issues but is a fierce critique of the state's repressive political, social and cultural milieu. She highlights various issues and problems of women by employing a lot of irony, images and metaphors in her poetry. Dharker's poetry shows her interest in women's health, their social condition and education. She reflects on the condition of women in contemporary world:

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, a young girl abused within their own families.....I do see all the bright young girls and the self-confident women around me..... Ofcourse, 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)

She knows that the condition of women nowadays has changed a lot, but what she wants is to work for the upliftment of those who still constitute the major part and are still suffering.

She began her poetic career with *Purdah And Other Poems* (1989) which establishes her reputation as a staunch feministic voice in Indian English poetry. Although a precise collection of 25 poems, the book exposes the several levels of oppression against the women which are presented through the eyes of a sensitive Muslim woman through her experiences:

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)

Through the first poem, "Purdah-1" in the collection she speaks against the institution of the veil which is used as a weapon in structured Islamic culture to subjugate a woman. The poem deals with the turning point in the life of a Muslim girl when she experiences injustice, oppression and violence through the culture of 'purdah'. She finds different meanings in the word 'Purdah' at different times. It is "a symbol of moral, religious and social taboo." (Chaudhury, 2006:173-74) Dharker objects to the veil as she considers it more mental than physical. Of course the veil or purdah secures her physical body and provides her safety from prying eyes. It is "A kind of safety/ the body finds a place to hide." (Pg 3 PAOP) But it also has a lot of negative effects. She is treated as all 'body' that needs a covering; her existence on this earth is considered as a symbol of lust and nothing else.

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 as according to her, it limits the opportunities to seek learning and enlightenment leading to the death of intellect just as earth covers the dead person-keeping them unaware of the experiences of the world:

The cloth fans out against the skin
Much like the earth that falls
On coffins after they put the dead men in. (Pg 3 PAOP)

Purdah is considered here as coffin for women who are given a burial treatment while alive. She is annoyed with the system as it snatches from a woman her identity and treats her very harshly. Purdah doesn't allow a woman to exercise her freedom as an individual and restricts her vision of the outside world as the experiences which are available to others but not to her as nobody recognizes her under the veil.

The girl experiences very strange feelings under purdah. Even the people she has known from her childhood become strangers for her and she for them. She is looked at by everybody as if she is a piece of wonder.

People she has known

Stand up, sit down as they have always done.

But they make different angles. (Pg 3 PAOP)

Dharker's focus is on the deadening aspects of the purdah system which becomes a barrier between a woman and the rest of the world. Commenting on her first book, Arundhati Subramaniam says:

Dharker's first book, explored a somewhat interior politics by probing the multiple resonance of the veil. The result was a work rich in layer and obliquity.....(Subramaniam, 2007 Online)

She starts the book by a revolt against the Purdah system but as she proceeds, she exposes the multiple meanings associated with 'Purdah' which is used to restrict a woman's life. She is forced to obey the norms prescribed by the male-oriented culture. Her adulthood must be accompanied by modesty and reticence:

She was old enough to learn some shame

She found it came quite naturally. (Pg 3 PAOP)

The above lines are a deliberate attempt of Dharker to make them ambiguous and ironic as:

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 Online)

Purdah remains no longer physical covering but has become a social prerequisite to cultivate modesty in women. When Dharker was asked in an interview about the most powerful words anyone has spoken to her, her reply was "Now you're old enough to learn some shame." (What Are They Whispering, online) The sense of sin and shame is hammered into every Muslim woman's mind from an early age. It is purdah which makes a woman believe that she is a sexual organ and should not tempt men in anyway:

Carefully carrying what we do not own

Between the thighs a sense of sin. (Pg 3 PAOP)

They have been taught to be 'ashamed' of their bodies. As a female, she has no choice but to accept it as sin. "The body-culture and its degrading fleshy enterprise, inflicts a guilty conscious." (Pandey, 1999:47-58) 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 these internalised ideas. As a result, she is detached from her real self and "She stands outside herself" (pg 4 PAOP) as 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 Online)

At every stage of their lives, women are made dependent on males, childhood is bonded to the father, adolescence is spent under the brother's control, youth in the service of the

husband and old age on the servitude of her sons. Dharker admits that “In Pakistan, I was always someone’s sister or someone’s daughter asking permissions to do things. It’s terrible to be dependent for approval on a male member of the family.” (Dharker, 1999:113) So she becomes a weak victim of oppressive structures and is forced to depend on men to save and protect her and rescue her from her plight.

Passing constantly out of her own hands
Into the corner of someone else’s eyes
While doors keep opening
Inward and again / Inward. (Pg 4 PAOP)

Dharker says:

I see a woman going deeper and deeper into herself, because the route outwards is barred to her. She is disappearing. I want her to come back and be seen. (Hughes, 2006 :Online)

Purdah is designed by a patriarchal society to suppress women so that they do not demand their independence and in a way keep up the superiority of men. So Dharker is pained that due to the hypocrisy of religious and political leaders, ideals and values are not sought genuinely.

It is very interesting to note that the purdah system faces challenges world-wide and even from male writers like Israr-ul-haq Majaz (1911-1950), a Pakistani Urdu poet, who 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)

In contemporary times, purdah system is so much in question that some countries like Malaysia, France condemned full purdah and even a woman is dismissed from many govt and private jobs and even from universities for extensive covering. But there are still women who veil willingly and define it as a sign of religious readiness and an indication of personal religious commitment. They reject the western idea that purdah is a burden upon them and brings them disgrace. They took veiling as a protection when they enter the public sphere. Many young women adopt the veil as a retort to extreme westernization and protest against the western feminism’s devaluation of her, so proudly throw their image of the ‘colonised oriental women’ in the face of western women’s caricature of her. They reject the western notions of purdah and mock their hypocrisy:

When western women were civilized ‘victorians’ because they covered up, exposure was deemed barbaric. Today, the covered veiled woman has replaced the exposed woman as the signifier of the ‘other’ indicating western woman’s superiority.
(Bulbeck,1998:30)

Our women were considered as barbaric by the west during the past as they didn’t cover like ‘Victorian modest women’ and today when the west have changed their ideology, they interpret the east through their own theories which is totally unacceptable to their eastern counterparts. So through purdah they offer a culture that functions as an alternative to permissiveness or licentiousness.

Dharker’s woman exhibits a purdah which is between her inner-self and her outer-world. She explores womanhood under Purdah as a “veiled ontology (or theory of existence) suggesting as in ‘Purdah-I’, ‘subtle and shifting psychological states of being.’” (Arana,2008:138-39) As ‘Purdah’ whether literal or metaphorical, weighs heavy on a woman’s soul.

According to Dharker, the fate of a girl child in a conservative Islamic society is sealed from her very birth and with age it gets worse. Girls are forced to go through traditional,

arranged marriages. They don't have any choice of their own but to accept whatever will be chosen for them. Throughout their life, they have been taught to cover "their brightness tightly round". These harsh practices of Islamic culture against woman are exposed / highlighted in "Purdah-II" through two women- Saleema and Naseem. The poet refers to the story of Saleema, who is forced to marry within her community, although she is in love with an English man but her religion doesn't allow her to marry outside her community, so she becomes a machine- a child-producer as her religion prohibits the use of contraceptives.

Had annual babies, then rebelled at last.

At last a sigh, behind the veil, /of life;

Found another man, became another wife. (pg 9 PAOP)

In desperation, she takes a divorce and elopes with her lover hoping that her predicament may change but, to no avail as her condition doesn't change:

Her neck is bowed as if she were a hood.

. watching, as any creature

that lifts its head and sniffs the air

only to scent its own small trail of blood. (pg 10 PAOP)

She feels guilty for her revolt and marrying again as her condition is the same after her second marriage: disgust, pain, bondage and no freedom. She learns that a man is man no matter which community he belongs. Naseem's condition is the same, who elopes with an English man, and is consequently excommunicated as her act brings shame for her family.

the table is laden at Moharram

and you are remembered.

among the dead. No going back

The prayers said. (pg 10 PAOP)

In an orthodox established Muslim culture, women are dealt with severe punishments for their 'loose morality'. All the women in "Purdah-II" by breaking religious rules face the wrath of their community. They are punished physically, socially, culturally and psychologically. So the poem mocks the ways in which society restricts the freedom, dignity and choice of women. According to Patke:

"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,2003:270-71)

In several of her poems, Dharker highlights the crime of sexual exploitation against women through the institution of marriage that often begins at a very young age in Muslim culture:

They have all been sold and brought,

The girls I knew,

Unwilling virgins who had been taught,

Especially in this strangers' land, to bind

Their brightness tightly round. (Pg. 7 PAOP)

Islamic laws, which guide a man's life in Muslim culture, allow a man to marry more than one woman at a time and he is free to divorce a woman at any time. He also enjoys an unquestioned authority over his wife in all matters. So according to poet, women are treated as slaves or commodities and brought and sold against "Meher" assured to them in each marriage as after divorce she is again forced to marry another man. She loses her youth and womanhood in this process of marrying again and again.

There is no love and mutual understanding between a wife and husband in forced traditional marriages but only lust. Dharker protests the ways in which a woman's choice is restricted and she is not allowed to marry according to her choice but to accept and marry the

man chosen by her parents. As a result she surrenders her happiness gladly and feels a sense of pride in it, so they indulge in each other's passionate delights without love.

Night after virtuous night.
you performed for them.
they warmed your bed. (Pg 7 PAOP)

The same situation is depicted in "Battle-Line" where man and woman are in conflict creating boundary lines with check points and then by their will destroy the same. Dharker questions- "Did you expect dignity?" The nations, lovers, husband and wife- behave similarly after they draw battle-lines:

Distrustful lovers / Who have fought bitterly
And turned their backs; / But in sleep, drifting slowly...
Forgetful of hostilities / Until, in the quiet dawn,
The next attack. (Pg 47 PAOP)

There is no love and understanding in their relation but only 'Skin's lazy hungers' as Kamala Das termed it, who also presents men as indifferent and lustful. Likewise, Dharker presents the sexual exploitation of a woman under Muslim tradition in which she is forced to spend her whole life with a man she doesn't love. . In "A Woman's Place" she says:

Our distance is elastic, It grows
.....
Reminding us how close we are. (pg 34 PAOP)

Islamic laws restricts women's role in society to the domestic sphere, which Dharker objects through her poems. She presents how women lose their own identity through marriage and adulthood. In the daily course of work like day-to-day shopping, cooking, facing the hostility of mother-in-law, waiting for the husband and being alone, she is entirely changed into another woman during the course of years. "Another Woman" depicts:

This morning she brought green 'methi'
In the market, choosing the freshest bunch;.....
Come home, faced her mother-in-law's
Dark looks, took / the leaves and chopped them.
(Pg.38-39 PAOP)

Society, religion and culture left her with no other options, so "It was the only choice she has ever known":

This was the house she has been sent to,
The man she has been bound to,
The future she has been born into. (Pg 39 PAOP)

Marriage and adulthood for women imply a relative loss of self as she is subjugated by the strong weapon of patriarchy- that is "domestication" which Dharker protest.

Dharker argues through her poetry, that sometimes it is our family that becomes a cause for oppression and suffering- often the result of masculine domination and destruction. Mothers who lack their own rights have little protection to offer their daughters from male relatives and other authoritative figures. So, mothers often mould their daughters in their own roles in patriarchal cultures. In "Choice", Dharker depicts how at first the daughter wants to escape the fate of her mother but in course of time she learns the ways and attitudes of her own mother and follows her. Dharker concludes:

Mother, I find you staring back at me.
When did my body agree
To wear your face? (Pg 42 PAOP)

It is clearly indicated that in patriarchal Islamic society, one woman is used to condition another woman. So in "The Hunted House" Dharker advises:

Kick the can! Kick the can

Run! But don't go near
the hunted house.
there are dead women's fingers squirming.

(Pg 21 PAOP)

Dharker mocks those religious norms which restrict a woman's life and her freedom. According to her, in Islamic culture, everything is prescribed for a woman, what to do and what not to do. She is not even allowed to smile freely:

Mouths must be watched, especially
If you are a woman. A smile
should be stifled with your sari-end.

.....

if you need to scream, do it

Alone but in front of a mirror. (Pg 32 PAOP)

It is ironic that she is not allowed to reveal her happiness or pain. "A plastic religion, a farce created by a patriarchal system, under the weight of which woman is cracking, seems to be Imtiaz's message." (Baskaran, 2008:31) In "The Child Sings" Dharker observes:

She is nothing, but a crack
Where the light forgot to shine. (pg 31 PAOP)

She is not even in control of her life and has restrictions imposed upon her in every sphere of her life. She is strictly ordered that:

whatever they might wear/ In the purdah of the mind....
They veiled their eyes/ With heavy lids
They hid their breasts/ But not the fullness of their lips.

(Pg 7 PAOP)

She can't even complain against it as "Nothing gave her the right/ to speak." (pg 39 PAOP) Dharker uses an indirect method and puts forth her arguments by suggestivity which ultimately proves very, thought provoking. The images in her poems as Ezekiel puts it, "are not merely images created for poetic effect, they are like blazing fires compelling the readers to take notice." ("Imtiaz Dharker" India poetry:online). "A Women's Place" describes the position of women and how she is treated as the 'Other'. According to Siamon de Beauvoir:

One is not born a woman; one becomes one..... The situation of woman is that she...a free and autonomous being like all creatures...nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other. (1984:29)

Although a woman is born free like all creatures but at every step of her life she has bondages imposed on her by the suppressive cultural and social laws made by a prescriptive, patriarchal system. She revolts against all this injustice done to women and is sure and hopeful about a woman's future that one day their condition will change as in "The Rope":

Be still, and wait
You are the cause, the victim
And the one witness:
These are tomorrow's cradles rocking. (pg 64-PAOP)

It is through women speakers in the poetry of Dharker that we are able to identify the problems of women in the society. Dharker wants to share the experiences of all women who suffer these inhuman conditions, hence the question:

What you did when the new moon
Sliced you out of purdah,
Your body shimmering through lies. (Pg 9 PAOP)

So according to Chaudhury:

Dharker's women enable us to examine large social problems pertaining to this religion, country and identity. (2006:173-74)

A woman is held responsible for every natural thing (physicality) and suffers a lot in a conservative Muslim family. In “Zarina’s Mother” a mother looks at the future onset of puberty in her daughter as some disease:

‘Yes I Know what it is she’s got....

The disease will flare inside her.’ (Pg 35 PAOP)

Religious upbringing plays a crucial role in the conceptual framework particularly of a Muslim girl. So Dharker depicts in “Going Home”:

Mummy put me in purdah

Or he’ll see the hair sprout in my lap. (Pg 24 PAOP)

In this regard Dharker says:

I feel that women generally are too accepting of the guilt they always feel. I can’t remember who said, ‘show me a woman who doesn’t feel guilty and I’ll show you a man’. (Dharker, 1999:114)

So patriarchal culture always tries to bind a woman in the cover of guilt and shame as Dharker depicts in “Purdah I”, that a woman carries a “sense of sin between her thighs” although she does not own it, she is forced psychologically to accept it as shame. She gives voice to her consciousness as a victim, also in poems like “Sacrifice” and “Going Home” where it is clearly shown that social customs weigh heavily on a woman’s consciousness and the result is fear. In “Sacrifice” she says:

..., sweet/ song will burst through skin, /
sliced, quit perfectly, between each remembered sin/
and sacrifice, / a saviour thrusting in. (pg 14 PAOP)

Or in “Going Home”:

At twelve/ ‘not a mark on her, she’ll never have an
awkward stage’/ his wrinkled white hand slipped
down her back. (pg 24 PAOP)

One more aspect of the Muslim culture which Dharker criticises is that women are excluded from all religious ceremonies. She objects and feels annoyed that a woman’s biology is not regarded suitable for entering a mosque and so is given inhuman treatment. In “Grace” she says:

It is not often...../ that you come across a place
Where you are sure to find/ some kind of peace.
the Masjid at least, you think.....
A woman comes/ With her eyes concealed.
She trails the mouth behind her.
We are defiled. (Pg 11 PAOP)

In this pathetic condition and unbearable suffering she desires for mental peace/comfort and for that moves to God. But to her utter shock she finds, in this phallogocentric world God is also male. So she is prohibited from entering a mosque as in her presence men can’t concentrate on prayer. These lines reinforce, as Rana Nair remarks, “the idea of a woman as inferior, as a temptress, the very sight of woman is sinful and distracting to the virtuous male.” (Guleria, 2007:275-281) Women are also supposed to defile the mosque, as menstruation makes them impure. But how strange! Man is produced from the same blood:

Allah u Akbar/ You say the words to reassure yourself
Your mouth clears/ God the compassionate, the merciful,
Created man from clots of blood. (Pg 12 PAOP)

So the words coming from Masjid ‘Allah u Akbar’ seems unsympathetic and artificial to her. In the above lines, Dharker also protests with mock innocence that the thing for which a woman is regarded as ‘impure’ is the same from which a man is developed. The title of the above poem which is “Grace” is ironic as the whole poem is about the disgrace of women. In

“Prayer” the same idea is conveyed and is about the discrimination against women. The line: “What prayer are they whispering?” (pg 13 PAOP) suggests that there should not be any discrimination on the basis of sex and if so, that worship is of no avail at all. She is constantly demolishing the laws and values of male hegemony which, by using the crutches of Islamic laws, suppresses a woman’s rights. Dharker believes that the basic principles of Islam are made to favour a man and suppress women. She mocks that women have to observe Purdah even from God:

But woman. Woman, / You have learnt
that when God comes /You hide your head. (Pg 8 PAOP)

Muslim women are taught to recite the holy book mechanically without understanding the meaning in a traditional Islamic culture:

Maulvi’s fat dark fingers
hustling across the page,
Nudging words into your head;
words unsoiled by sense
Pure rhythm on the tongue. (Pg 5 PAOP)

Dharker objects to these ways and is very critical about the education imparted to Muslim women in this manner through which emphasis is given to learning by heart than understanding it. She narrates her personal experiences:

I’d read the Koran. We had a strict moulvi who rapped us on our knuckles or hit us on our heads if we got the words wrong. I didn’t understand a word as it was in Arabic,.....But the point was in the rhythm.....I saw this as part of my culture. (Dharker, 1999: 112)

So the stress is on the rhythm rather than the meaning and if a girl fails to recite it correctly, she is punished very harshly.

In male-dominated cultures religion is used as a cover in order to perform all unholy things. As always, William Shakespeare has the appropriate remark:

it is too much prov’d that/ with devotion’s visage/ and pious actions we do sugar/
o’er the devil himself. (Shakespeare, 1980:121-128)

Dharker exposes the hypocrisy in religious activities through the image of Haji in “Purdah-II”:

There was nothing holy in his look.
Hands that had prayed at Mecca
Dropped a sly flower on your book. (Pg 6 PAOP)

In the above lines sexual exploitation through religious activities is also indicated. The moulvi, who pretends to be very religious offers flowers to girl in order to molest her that too during the teaching of Quran. So the irony of the religion is revealed in the poem.

Despite all this, Dharker doesn’t feel any pity for women but “on the contrary, she celebrates the feminine mystique with an interesting argument.”(Naik, 2006:150-51) Hence says in “No-man’s Land”:

It is the woman who knows
you can take in/ the invader, time after time,
And still be whole. (Pg 51 PAOP)

It is the woman who has a capacity to bear and face all this with courage and so is not destroyed in the suppressive male-dominated culture. Dharker wants to do something for women, to alter the condition, although she is not sure but still retains the hope that through her poetry she may change the minds of people. So hopes in “The word”:

It is pure power, /Not in the throat or on the page/.....
It is waiting to be fed / Let loose, one day,
When its moment comes, / Upon a world unready

To be stung from sleep. (Pg 58-PAOP)

So Dharker concludes her first book by suggesting that a women's condition can only change when she will be able to break these shackles of culture, religion and society:

The section concludes with a profound revelation that emancipation for a woman has to be only in the breaking of these barricades set by conventional codes of patriarchy and redefining herself. (Baskaran, 2008:33)

So she starts her next collection *I Speak For The Devil* (2001) with this effort and dedicated it to all, "who stood up and spoke out....who are still struggling to find their feet and their voices....and who haven't yet begun." (Dharker,2001)

Thematically, it is concerned with gender issues, the spaces women are allowed to inhabit in different societies and their struggle to break free from restrictive gender roles. (Lehmann, 2012 Online)

The book is divided into three sections. The first section, "They'll say, 'She Must Be From Another country'" is an anthem of all the women who called themselves as 'freaks' and who revolt collectively against rules made by religious leaders and ends with a simplistic self-satisfied proclamation of difference that "I must be from another country" (Pg 38 ISFD). She starts this section by narrating the pathetic condition of the girl who faced the backlash of religious orthodoxy and suffered because she tried to break the shackles of that relation which was a bondage to her. In traditional cultures like Islam, strict sexual codes for women are maintained and if a woman tries to step out by choosing her own husband, or seeking divorce from an abusive husband, she is supposed to bring dishonour to her family and in order to discipline her, she is maimed or executed by her family on the name of 'honour killing' to maintain their reputation, spoiled by disobedient woman. As Dharker narrates:

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 'Honour Killing.' (Dharker,2001:11)

She mocks and revolts this act in the very first poem of the book, "Honour Killing" which she wrote in response to above event and arouses the feelings of the readers by sensitizing them, awakening their consciousness to an urgent feminist concern. Honour killings known as 'karo-kari' in Pakistan and enjoy a high level of support there despite widespread condemnation from human rights associations. The concept of woman as 'property' and 'honour' is so deeply rooted in the culture of Pakistan that the state ignores the regular occurrences of women being killed by their families. It is also because the religious leaders use justifications from their religious books for sanctioning punishments against the 'disobedient' women. The poet feels empathy and desires that all women must protest against these deadly religious sanctions. She mocks the religious authorities that instead of punishing the culprits, the incident was welcomed as Honour Killing. So she is in an open revolt with her culture in "Honour Killing":

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

Her belief is that a religion that treats its members in such a way can't claim to be a correct interpretation of faith. So she shuns the faith that doesn't allow her to enjoy her freedom, before emerging as an independent new free woman.

Its female speaker describes the process of stripping away layer upon layer of tradition and convention to find out who she really is after she has left all these things behind. She starts by taking off this black coat of a country, in the process

rejecting a national belonging which is clearly gendered and Islamic as the black coat alludes to the practice of wearing a chador. (Lehmann, 2012 Online)

She feels a sense of restriction due to the gender norms, nationality and religious practices. Symbolically the above claims are reduced to veil in the poem as they snatched away her independence and did not allow her to act according to her own needs and aspirations. She dares to go against the religious laws, which limit a woman's choice, not only inhibiting her actions as women but also take away her voice so that she could not give vent to her feelings and opinions. In this way she has been made 'faithless' by her religion.

She starts a new journey towards her real identity by stripping herself of her clothes and kills her old self, which suffers dishonouring and humiliation due to the orthodox, restrictive culture in which she is raised. She cast off all claims of this religion, culture and country. In the process of taking off these claims, she realized that she has choices which she had never known before when her life was restricted:

Born wearing it/
I believed I had no choice (pg 13 ISFD)

She removes every part of her body before creating a new geography for herself. She does not even hesitate to remove her womb as she wants to be free from any kind of restriction which could be placed on her due to her sex.

I'm taking off this skin, /
and then the face the flesh,
The womb. (pg 13 ISFD)

Now when she is free from every gender restriction and religious affiliation, she demands:

Let's see/ What I am in here /
When I squeeze past / The easy cage of bone.
(Pg 13 ISFD)

So the poem is a suitable piece in which she tries to clean herself by stripping herself naked, before creating a new identity for herself. Dharker reflects herself:

If the starting point of *Purdah And Other Poems* was life behind the veil, the starting point of the new book, *I Speak For The Devil*, is the striptease, about what happens when the self 'Squeezes past the, the easy cage of bone. (Subramaniam,2007:Online)

After killing her old self she emerged as a new woman like the phoenix who is born out of her own ashes. She is now free to set her 'geography' by 'crafting', 'plotting' so she grows again but this time according to her own beliefs and without restrictions. So in the poem 'Honour Killing' it is not woman who is killed, but "a notion of honour that from the speaker's perspective burdens women with a life that forces them to betray and neglect themselves." (Lehmann, 2012 Online) Although it is very dangerous to go against religious orthodoxy and face the wrath of religious leaders, Dharker doesn't fear but presents her thoughts and emotions in a bold and candid way and even doesn't hesitate to adopt sin as she, "got fed up with being good." (Pg 68 ISFD) According to Arundhati Subramaniam:

For the process of stripping away superfluity has been not merely cultural and political, but psychological and emotional as well. It's been about cutting away unfruitful frustration and anger. (*The Hindu*, 2002)

Dharker takes further this journey towards remaking and rediscovery in fallowed poems like "The Orders", "Here", "There", "Announcing the Departure", "Announcing the Arrival" etc which also have metaphorical connotations of a journey to some another promising place. In "The Orders" speaker is seen through the eyes of another so her face looks disordered. Her face is needed to be seen correctly which can be only done by a broken mirror:

Someone else gives the orders here.....
why is this mirror broken?

It makes sense of my disordered face.
I'll go/ I must have stayed too long
I've begun to look like you. (pg 14 ISFD)

Dharker recalls the powerlessness of women and how they are subordinated and even alienated from their own selves, so there is an urgent need to start journey towards self-refashioning. "There" is marked by a sense of regret towards past as 'there' was a chaotic place in which somebody else was making decisions for you while you (woman) had neither any choice nor voice. So, in order to defend her rights and change her condition, she requires some other face. In "Announcing the Departure" says:

I think my body is asking
To be in some promised place.
I think my body is begging
For another face. (Pg 20 ISFD)

"Announcing the Arrival" is the only poem in this section which focuses on the men. The poet refers to a new century which would not be of men. The poem is crowded with 'tired businessmen' who were 'once thin boys' who have: "grown to men who struggled/ past a paunch to tie/ their feet into shoes." (pg 27 ISFD) The poet presents these men as old and inflexible and soon there time will be over and soon they will be eaten up by their own words. The next poem "Monsoon Words" thus depicts a future belonging to women. There will be opportunities for them to change the realities of their lives. This is presented through the girl in 'monsoon words' who run on a road full of possibilities that were impossible before:

Look away and the rain will fall/ on to your mouth.../
we belong in this time/ after all. (pg 28 ISFD)

The city's sea-shore, once belonged to only the 'thin boys' in the previous poem now also belong and accommodate the speaker and other women. Thus she looks more hopefully at the present and to the future. The next poem "Announcing the Arrival (for Ayesha)" is even stronger in sentiment. The speaker celebrates the end of the century that was announced earlier in first 'arrival' poem. She is happy to leave her past that used to constrain her as a new and better century is waiting for her:

The hypocrites, the prudes / running our lives
With their holier-than-thou prissy attitudes
The bigots with offended sensibilities
The bastards..... (Pg 31 ISFD)

Dharker is optimistic about the future of new generation girls like her daughter, Ayesha, who have a 'bright' future ahead. She encourages these new generation girls as the power to transform the world lies in their hands, so that everything becomes possible for them, if they want, she believes:

The world shifts/ with a lift of your hair....
Let's scream.....let's wear red. (Pg 33 ISFD)

After creating a space for herself the questions of religion, gender and nationality no longer bother her. She is now securely positioned and has rejected all belongingness to any one religion, culture or country. So in "Not a Muslim Burial" she does not want to be associated with any religion even after her death. So declares:

No one must claim me....
No name, no nationality
Let them label the remains
Lost property. (Pg 37 ISFD)

The last poem of the section "They'll Say, "She must be from another Country" shows a more positive attitude of the poet.

She rejects everyone defiantly. No matter who attempts to control her thoughts norms and conventions because she recognizes these as arbitrary artificial constructs. (Lehmann, 2012 online)

She is now happy and feels a sense of pride in not belonging to any one as she has grown too big to fit in these constructions now:

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. (Pg 39 ISFD)

Dharker in a revolt imagines a separate country in the poem for herself and all other women, where they will not be forced to follow customs and ways sanctioned by these frauds and hypocrites:

May be there is a country/ where all of us live,
All of us freaks / who are not able to give
Our loyalty to fat old fools, / the crooks and thugs....
Who Puff out their chests,/ Put their feet on our necks,
And break their own rules. (Pg 38 ISFD)

She does not care now for those who make judgements and thrust their values on her. She calls women to reject the societal and religious norms imposed on them. At the end of her journey she is free from all these imposed forces and values and succeeded in attaining a new identity for her.

The second section of the book is "The Broken Umbrella" which presents the lives of women and how their feelings become disembodied from their bodies as in "In a cold place":

My glove is waiting / For our needs to coincide, /
for the moment when / its warm mouth, /
my cold fingers/ will happily, collide. (Pg 46 ISFD)

So she "continues the theme of women being alienated from their true selves." (King, 2002:88) In "Dot" all the women have achieved a mutual understanding, "we have found the voice/ we share". (pg 49 ISFD) The "Knees" further proceed towards an acceptance and understanding of her position, so is possible for her to see ' "nothing broken/ I just feel a bit / more rounded suddenly." (pg 50 ISFD) The last poem of this section "Yellow Today" presents speaker optimistically realistic so states:

I am busy making dreams/ for the daylight to eat/
when it gets up...../
This hunger is shouting for attention./
It wants your soul. (pg 53 ISFD)

So at the end of this section she is ready to revenge for her past terribly miserable condition and dismantle male hegemony.

In the third section, "I Speak For The Devil" which is also the title given to entire volume, she enjoys her freedom when possessed by the devil. She adopts in it the devil's voice to speak freely because as a woman she is denied this freedom of speech. This section present a woman's body as a territory possessed by herself or by somebody else like a child or a devil. According to her, women are respected only when they carry someone else inside their bodies and only in that condition they are listened to and set free. So the title of the book *I Speak For The Devil* acknowledges that when a woman carries a devil within her then and only she is allowed to speak and able to enjoy her freedom. When in the poem "The Djinn in Auntie", the auntie is possessed by a djinn, it proves a blessing in disguise for her as after it she opens her mouth and expresses her thoughts openly. Through the 'djinn' or devil, she is actually speaking for herself :

But one night when she went down.....
That was when the djinn got in.....

Next day, / when she opened her mouth
And the other voice began to sing. (Pg 57 ISFD)

So due to the devil i.e djinn within her, she “looked bigger every day, awash / with knowledge” (pg 57 ISFD) She expresses herself through the devil and knows it well that without the devil inside her “she’d be lost” so the “djinn was a gift/ she got one day.” (Pg 58 ISFD) In the poem, the woman is actually set free when she is ‘possessed’. Now she adopts the voice of devil, nobody can stop her now to express her feelings and thoughts. But she is listened and believed eagerly So she got an opportunity to expose so called ‘great leaders’ of Pakistan like Ayub Khan Din who are responsible for suppressing women of their land and on the other hand themselves enjoying in another land by drinking wine and telling stories of their women “to a woman in a skin-tight skirt/ that shows all of her legs.” (Pg 58 ISFD) She exposes the hypocrisy of these leaders who on the one hand restrict their own women and on the other hand enjoy the company of naked English women.

However it does not mean that she is rejecting her religion wholly but only its practices which are organised by so called ‘religious leaders’. Dharker is disgusted by the behaviour and attitude of these religious leaders and goes to the extent of abusing them. So in the poem “All of us” many women’s voices like Rehmat Ali’s wife, Raju’s mother, Mala, Naseem, Mary, Anita, Fatima, Sarah and Dharmyanti merge into one as they all are subject to the same servitude- physical, psychological, social and cultural, but at the end they dare to step out of their bounds and challenge patriarchal culture. According to Simone de Beauvoir:

Much more interesting are the insurgent females who have challenged this unjust society, a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful work. (de Beauvoir,1984:718)

All the women in the poem awoke now. After adopting the voice of devil they are able to shun away all restrictions imposed on them by religious and cultural forces and are able to hear each other laugh and scream:

They can say we’re out of control
They can say we’ve gone/ to the devil. (Pg 61 ISFD)

With the devil within her, sujata in the next poem “Power” is able to enjoy her freedom as now she has freed herself from cultural and religious bonds. Now she is not any longer in that subordinate condition but is respected and consulted in important matters. So it is the first time that people:

Look at me and see / More than clothes....
I close my mouth / to keep the freedom in. (Pg 63 ISFD)

The next poem “Breeding ground, Chicago” is dedicated to Christine, who got a new face provided to her by the djinn/devil, who enters into her and promises a new life to her by shaping her thoughts anew:

That’s how the devil got in,
Slipped into my skin,
Rearranged my thoughts
Like old clothes at the change
of the season. (Pg 64 ISFD)

The Devil provides every woman, irrespective of their religion and culture, the opportunity to revenge and express her ideas freely. Not only Islam but every religion restricts a woman’s life. So after attaining a new identity these women, exposes all the havocs and oppressions done to them by using religious values in a frank and authentic way. Dharker expresses in “The Location”:

I realised quite soon.....
The devil was in me, / walking in my feet,
Living in my clothes, / owning one half

Of my heart. (Pg. 74 ISFD)

So through devil within her she enjoys her freedom. Dharker speaks for the devil in *I Speak For The Devil* but :

She does not feature a Miltonic Lucifer, Faustian double-dealer or sulphurous Beelzebub. But one who lurks in the khassi (toilet in Punjabi); he possesses people.....he can even be confused. Dharker says, 'beyond the confusion is anger, acidic dribbles of rage as precise as the design of frost on a window.'

(Pinto, 2004: online)

So the devil she enjoys inside her is not the grand 'Lucifer' but one who lives with people in their day to day lives, sometimes amusing, disturbing and at other times frightening.

Taking the opportunity of the Devil's voice Dharker uses it as a weapon to expose hypocrisy of both religious leaders and their activities and attacked them in several of her poems. In "Saviours", Dharker exposes the hypocrisy of those men who have "a rare genius for revenge". (Pg 85 ISFD) All the 'unholy' men carry holy books and wear masks of holy men. They call themselves our saviours but in reality they are the cause of all our disasters and social tensions.

It's hard to say
Who's on which side.
All the murderess are wearing/ Masks
With god's face painted on. (pg 88 ISFD)

In "Guardians" she mocks religious leaders:

Strange how the guardians
Of our morals.....
Slither into juicy things
Where they don't belong. (Pg 88 ISFD)

Dharker raises her voice against those prescriptive rules of religion that have crushed humanity in humans. The holiness and divinity of God has been lost. There is no faith and devotion in man. Another poem "Great Glory" also exposes the hypocrisy of man and his shameful conduct. He doesn't even spare God and uses his name for all his misdeeds. Dharker reveals the humiliation of God as:

God was hijacked long ago,
Held hostage in empty churches,
Desecrated temples, / Broken mosques. (Pg 98 ISFD)

Dharker, "spoke for God even as someone whose beliefs had been eroded" (Pinto, 2004 Online). So in the name of religion and God man creates havoc everywhere, he doesn't need religious places now to glorify his name but his "work is in every/ daily newspaper.../ and on every T V" (pg 98 ISFD). This is an ironic statement made by Dharker as now man is no more involved in doing good deeds for the sake of religion but whatever destruction he creates is broadcast either on TV or in newspapers.

Freedom is the prime need of women and Dharker seeks it through "This Room" in which she enjoys her freedom as her room is breaking out of its confines and seeking 'space', 'light', 'empty air'. Thus she says:

This is the time and place/ to be alive. (pg 87 ISFD)

In order to maintain this freedom, she appeals every woman that she should revolt against these repressive norms of man-orientated culture which reduces a woman to a mere Skelton. In "Canvas":

I don't want
A face that simpers harmlessly.....
Someday I plan to draw it

Interesting, dangerous, / cruel. (Pg 102 ISFD)

She is very happy with the devils face painted on as it provides her opportunities she has never known. In "Yes, I drank the wine" says:

Yes I drank the wine/ Today I'm free
to party with the djinn. (pg 119 ISFD)

So what Dharker aims through her poetry is that life should be free from limiting and immoral prescriptions of culture, religion and politics. Through *I Speak For The Devil* She tries to explore the place and identity of women in contemporary complex world. According to her 'the final act of faith can only be an act of love.' (Pinto, 2004 Online) She did not believe in a concept of traditional God but the God as 'goodness' in human beings. So in order to legitimize a space for woman in the world, she uses a defiant voice aiming to free women from bondages of culture, society and religion.

In short, *Purdah And Other Poems* starts with an exploration of the female body under the veil and how this veil becomes a barrier between her inner and outer world. Thus portraying through it the struggle of women with an oppressive culture and social norms and the challenges they face in the modern world with its changing mores. But at the end, she successfully leaves behind her past tradition with its religious restrictions and cultural impositions:

A past that you agreed / to leave behind. (Pg 57 PAOP)

I Speak For The Devil takes away further, aspects of gender and religion and is about a journey towards self-discovery and self-refashioning. It starts with a new search for herself where she has cast off all claims of nationality, religion and gender and explores a new terrain for herself. She removes every part of her body before creating a new geography for herself and at the end successfully creates her own identity in "Exorcism":

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

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