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Feminist Concerns in Imtiaz Dharker's *Purdah I* and *Purdah II*

Noopur

To be or not to be a writer has always been a dilemma for a woman at all times in all communities. It is only after the European enlightenment and its consequent followed –the industrial growth and the resultant modernity that more and more women became visible as artists, writers and individuals. Moving from Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*(1929), this movement for the empowerment of women is generally studied under the label –'feminism'. But the feminism is theorized differently in India than in the west. The condition of women is not same all over the world. With the change in the geographical area, women's situation also undergoes a change. Set parameters are not sufficient enough to inculcate the demands of women in different countries. Their situation and status is quite different and require different parameters to establish their identities. But if a woman is not given deserving respect and equality in a country then it would surely be a threat to other women of other countries. As Martin Luther King opines that- "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King Luther). Feminist theory is mainly concerned with giving a voice to women. Women can only uplift themselves by integrating their voices. One should not turn away his head by seeing other in pain. As Shiv Khera, one of the profound philosophers opines that- "If Injustice is happening to your neighbor and you can sleep, WAIT for your turn, You are NEXT" (Shiv Khera).

The main concern of feminists is to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles which is traditionally assigned by the patriarchy. Gender inequality states that women's social position and their lived experiences of life are not only different but also unequal to men. They are not given any say in the society. Their main work is to do the household chores and to provide favors to their husbands. Some of the famous feminists like Taslima Nasreen have worked a lot to build support for the equalitarian status of women.

In recent Indian Writing in English, isolated women writers are no longer peripheral and go unheard. The growing awareness of woman as a subject has resulted into a new, more (gender sensitive) egalitarian socio-cultural transformation in the present age. But after such hue and cry the plight of Muslim women is pitiable. Their condition is even worse than the Hindu women. As Simone de Beauvoir expresses her state – "A free and autonomous creature like all others, a woman finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the 'other' and reduce her to the status of the 'second sex'"(Beauvoir,391). The Muslim woman who is confined in *Purdah* also wants emancipation. Imtiaz Dharker is an emerging poetess who as their spokesman writes about the suffering of women overpowered by the corrupt and inhuman male dominant code. Her writings in a major way seek to dismantle the male hegemony.

Imtiaz Dharker, born in Lahore, raised in Britain, now lives in India, London and Wales. She calls herself a Scottish Muslim Calvinist, married to a non Muslim, Anil Dharker. She is a poet, an artist and a documentary filmmaker. Her books *Purdah*, *Postcards from God*, *I Speak for the Devil* and *The Terrorist at my Table* are about the women's wounded psyche. Imtiaz Dharker's *Purdah* was considered a major "new voice" with a "sense of political commitment" (King, 321). Earlier it was argued that *purdah* was initially designed to protect women from being harassed, and from evil gaze, but later these practices became a way to justify efforts to subjugate women and limit their mobility and freedom. Even the title of the poem semiotically suggests that "purdah" is more than a mere instrument of physical protection from the male gaze. It is loaded with ideological/cultural implications which are used in the discursive misconstructions of "women" as a sub human category in a cultural environment where religious orthodoxy prevails.

"Purdah 1" is a discreet protest against the tradition of veil strictly sanctioned and imposed on Muslim women. Dharker has disclosed the very bitter truths of the life of a Muslim girl. The turning point comes in the life of a Muslim girl when she suddenly becomes conscious of her sexual growth, other are perhaps more conscious (society). It is quite equivalent to shoveling mud on the coffin of a dead person, she says,

"One day they said

She was old enough to learn some shame."

And,

"purdah is a kind of safety.

The cloth fans out against the skin

Much like the earth that falls

On coffins after they put the dead men in"(1-8).

Muslim families start training their girl children of six to nine years to wear *purdah*. Later they are secluded from the outer world. They are taught to walk only in 'burkha chadar' afterwards. Dharker calls it as 'the interior colonization' of woman, which only makes her a walking corpse. She is even decimated to 'a clod of earth; a dying tree whose roots desperately struggle to balance withstand. But the *purdah* is forcefully accepted by the Muslim girl as their fate but internally they totally disapprove this deadening veil. *Purdah*, thus implies physical, material device to segregate woman from the outside world. It is a symbol of alienation and isolation from the outside world. It is a wall between woman and the world, she resides in. It is a repression of will and choice. But it is interesting to observe, how "unfeministically", Kamala Das defended the *purdah* system, as she says, "I liked the *purdah* which Muslim Woman wore. I liked the orthodox lifestyle of Muslim women" (*Times of India* Dec.16,1999, p.6). *Purdah* acts as a dehumanising device which makes a woman feels,

“as if she were a clod of Earth
 and the roots as well
 scratching for a hold
 between the first and second rib.” (28-31)

Purdah can be called as a terrible weapon used against a woman. It is a powerful image which like a door can lock or free a woman. For a woman, purdah is an iron curtain drawn between herself and the society. A Muslim woman is even more disgraced by the conservative society. As the people want her to teach some manners, decorum and dignity because for them the woman in the purdah is, “Carefully carrying what we do not own/ between the thighs, a sense of sin” (16-17).

Imtiaz totally negates this label of ‘Sinner’. But some considered this purdah as a sign of honor. Santi Rozairo quotes Maulana Maududi, “a pakistani Muslim theologian who sees purdah as operating to guard against the ‘dangerously uncontrolled’ human sexual urge” (Rozairo, 89).

“Purdah was a woman's safe veil which can protect her from the penetrating gaze of public eyes” they said. But man is imprisoning her personality. Women become devoid of choices and became the puppet in the hands of social power. The purdah is no more than the woman's prison house. This shows the internal suffering of a woman, who is near dead by the practice of wearing purdah. The female body becomes the terrain on which nationalists distinctions are made visible. As P. Chatterjee opines that “Dress, behaviour, eating habits fix a certain form of essential femininity in terms of certain culturally visible signifiers all of which are mapped on to the body” (Chatterjee 1993:130).

The poem ends on a ambiguous note of hope where a woman, as a victim of exclusion, is quite hopeful of the opening up of the possibilities in the inner space of herself,

“While doors keep opening
 inward and again
 inward”(34-36).

Imtiaz has killed many birds with no stone. But in her “purdah II” she could be called as lioness, fiercest in her silence. In “purdah II” she has expressed her serious humanistic and feministic concerns. “Purdah II” takes off where “purdah I” ends. It is from her inner silenced self that how a woman hears new voices of resistance and protest against the religious orthodoxy that perpetuates their ‘colonization’ in the society. The pages of Koran, instead of inspiring lives, appear as ‘old bones’ to a Muslim woman. Religion itself is male oriented, which provides no solace to her, as it only supports man and suppresses woman. Hence to the woman, the prayer call, ‘allah-u-akbar’ is nothing more than a piercing note emanating from the cold marble of the

mosque. Purdah becomes the mean of putting the fear or dread of God into the minds of women as,

“ God was justice
justice could be dread
but woman.woman,
you have learnt
that when god comes
you hide your head.”(85-89).

How ironical it is that these women have to observe purdah from God even! As Ishrat Aafreen opines, “The final challenge to patriarchy lies in “Not I, but you need this chadar now/for my person is not merely a symbol of your lust” (Aafreen, 95). Imtiaz Dharker wants all these women to rebel against this male dominated society. Dharker wants to share the experiences of these females who have been reduced to mere ghosts in such inhumane conditions. She even pleads to all the women to discard the purdah and she says,

“Break cover
Break cover and let us see
the ghosts of the girls with tell- tale lips” (111).

Further Dharker depicts the real position of woman which is static, no matter to which community she belongs to. Woman is forced in a traditional marriage. All the girls are fated to live and die with no will or choice of their own. She recollects her cousins, Saleema and Naseem. Saleema married, divorced, re-married producing children annually to each husband, but finally she sought a refuge in her mother's lap. They are “unwilling virgins”. This veil is not only a concealing garment but a purdah of mind. All the women are mere commodity, “They have all been sold and bought.”

It exposes the external suffering of women. Women have been represented as a social outcaste, symbolically one with a hunch on her back due to constant stooping. She is made to consider herself as an unclean figure in the eyes of others. They are forced to perform for others,

“Night after virtuous night,
you performed for them,
They warmed your bed”(71-73).

Why only a woman is responsible for doing each and everything for a man? A woman in today's society has no voice of her own. For instance, Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* states that “if it is degrading to be a woman then it is even more degrading to be like a woman.” Imtiaz Dharker, wants Muslim women to summon up sufficient soul-force, to protest against the exploitative power structure. She even involves the young women to abandon the ideology of ‘Shame.’

“Naseem you ran away

and your mother burned with shame”(116-18).

Basically Purdah II signifies the urgent need to reconstruct the Islamic culture to get a free society in which women are not considered inferior beings. We must empower ourselves to reconstruct the filthy minds of the society. Gandhiji, in 1927, gave a call to Women of India to “tear down” the purdah that stunts their growth and enslaves them to inhumane conditions, “Chastity is not hot-house growth. It cannot be super imposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounded wall of purdah. It must grow from within it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation...it must be a poor thing that cannot stand the gaze of man” (*Young India* Feb.3,1927).

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry is a Satyagraha for changing the situation of Muslim women. Woman, who right from birth to death, is allowed to be constructed through the ideological prisms of purdah. How they are subjected to injustice, oppression, violence and different kinds of exploitation in Muslim communities. It highlights Dharker's representation of the real Muslim woman. Imtiaz Dharker, has represented the complex and provocative issues related to the situation of Muslim women.

Bruce King appreciates how Dharker critiques the orthodox Islamic culture that treats women “as slaves and commodities” (King, 322). Dharker has demanded a thorough re-examination of the hegemony of Islamic orthodoxy in the Muslim societies. Here is a special kind of political poetry that succeeds as the poetry of commitment and truth as it makes an aesthetic plea for the remaking of Islamic culture-in order to let women and men both live and prosper in a complete peace and harmony in a non violent civil society as imagined by Gandhiji in his idea of Swaraj.

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