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Towards a Poetics of Cultural Quest: Examining Dharker's Representation of Social Disintegration in *The Terrorist at My Table*

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Abstract:

This paper primarily aims to analyse the falling apart humanitarian values and the rapid increase in individualistic ideals in the modern world, by analysing the poems in the above-mentioned collection by Imtiaz Dharker. It aims to suggest the reasons behind the same, by using the poems as a backdrop. Dharker's views and poetic narratives revolve around how the world has lost the quintessential connection when it comes to empathising with others. The paper while examining the occurrences of growing differences, also concedes to the fact that this problem is actually inevitable. It not only articulates the shifts, patterns and subtleties one encounters when stepping out in a world dominated by materialistic concerns but also contends that how, in spite of the efforts put in to bring the required changes, one will ultimately be consumed by the same visceral temptations. This paper thus endeavours to unravel the inherent distinctions and contrasts that exists between the two worlds-one which she conjures up in her mind (the ideal one) and the one that we actually confront in reality.

Keywords: social disintegration, isolation, gross materialism, fragmented identities, individualism, scepticism, estrangement, collective decrepitude.

Society wields a powerful influence on individuals. People's norms, beliefs and values make up a collective consciousness, or a shared way of understanding and behaving in the world. This collective consciousness binds individuals together and creates a sense of social cohesion. However, as people engage in more economic activity, they tend to loosen the traditional bonds of family and moral solidarity that had previously ensured social integration. It is in this fundamental backdrop that this chapter intends to analyse the poems of Imtiaz Dharker in her seminal collection-*The Terrorist at My Table*.

According to Durkheim, traditional cultures experienced a high level of social and moral integration, as there was little individualism, and most behaviours were governed by

social norms. (Olsen 1965) However, as material acquisition came in, the homogeneity of society was disrupted and it led to the disintegration of mutual bonds- social ties weakened and social isolation increased. Dharker discusses the concepts of individualism and fragmentation in today's world with ordinary people as her mouthpieces. The central issue in these poems is a lack of social order, deteriorating familial bonds, defunct communication and diminishing affection among individuals - an offshoot of their excessive indulgence in a life devoted to temporal wish fulfilments and mercenary gains. The question is- Can modern society hold together in an age of increasing individualism and doubt?

The word individualism, like any other symbol or verbal coinage has become worn, refined, and transmuted by usage through the centuries. (Mencher 1947) Dharker's portrayal of disintegration is the one which comes through the assessment of occurrences of daily life. Here, the struggle is to include everything- financial stability, family, work and relationships in a haphazard chronicle, while also displaying a revisionary scepticism about narrow definitions of prosperity and victory. This self-reliance of humans has brought enormous benefits and accomplishments- mostly in material terms, but also has gradually impaired the ability to illustrate and paint life in all its tenderness. In these poems, if we follow her poetic trajectory from the perspective of a contemplative reader, we understand that her focus is essentially more on the different aspects of a corrupt society which is gradually collapsing down and less on the distorted ideas of the self. The narrative is extended and comes as a densely metaphoric meditation on the pessimism emerging out of the rivalry between the real and the prospective. The expectancy of a better future negotiates with the present sanctity and it is this lack of contentment, that Dharker unravels brutally, while also commenting on the factors responsible for this collective decrepitude.

The most striking image probably can be seen in the poem "*Firm*", where a stark contrast between a world which is blindly running on the way to ground breaking inventions, and the one where the distance between humans and sky has reduced, is presented. Amidst these vivid descriptions, there is also the mention of growing void between people- "Can you see me from up there, from that plane?" ("*Firm*" p.35) The spontaneity of changing tones throughout the poem cannot be missed out. In the starting lines, the poet tells us how this placement on the thirtieth floor gives her a sense of empowerment, makes her feel free from all the restrictions and she calls herself an "angel", whom the shafts of steel lift up. The term "angel" may suggest an ideal form of existence, which the poet once aspired for. We can think of the nuances behind the usage of this term by a poet, who is known to propagate a more fierce and vigilant form of femininity than her literary counterparts. The subtle hint at how women at

times, have to subjugate these elements to be able to enjoy the gifts of these technological advancements is indeed surprising. Or maybe it simply is a moment where she feels herself in communion with the divine energies bestowed upon her, as she assumes the identity of an “angel”. It may also suggest the relation of this energy with the state of perfection, the state of sublime- which again is a far-fetched idea in today’s scenario. Also, one can clearly see how the poet tries to paint a hierarchy, where though a woman rises through her intellect and strength, but can remain there only by abiding to the usual feminine self. “My feet are firmly planted here.” (“*Firm*” p.35) says about the same sustenance and the ability to command. Howsoever compromising and demanding this power might be, she will not give up. And how can she? She sees yet another “list” of dreams to be achieved in the blocks of the windows. These blocks are countless in a building which has thirty floors- which again brings into purview the same old notion of mankind’s incessant desires. Although she feels the pleasure of being on the top, this still doesn’t equate to the happiness she looks for, once all her wishes are fulfilled. She is conscious that this journey is taking her away from everyone. She is aware that this divide can never end, and still there is no stopping. The speaker here is a woman, but the verses hold true for men as well. In fact, it treats all human beings as one entity.

In another poem, “*Who Made Me?*” Dharker sounds sharply critical of humanity’s blind race towards the acquisition of material assets. Also, the language is bluntly provocative, as she talks about the insolent threat that has come from all sorts of modern amendments. She wants us to realise the cost we pay for such involvements, and recognises how this avarice also personalises an inner conflict, by giving it a human touch and hence universalising it. The poem is quite ingenious in its management of meanings. The situation is displayed in rhetorical sensitivity- “Who put the leeches on my back? Who bled me?” (“*Who Made Me?*” p.34) The speaker knows the answer and it is important to remember this. The poet is simply juxtaposing this unknown “who” over the tumultuous breakdown of morals and ethics. She invites us to accept the same, and in doing so, she seems to be performing the highest duty. She confronts us with a choice- to either execute the solution she suggests or convict ourselves of a never-ending guilt. However odd the dramatisation of play with words may seem, especially keeping in mind that she is referring to a rather obvious matter, one has to appreciate the objective and semi contextual form of language she uses. Her weapon of subversion of a modern decayed society is in her immense capacity to tell transformative stories- a skill that allows her not merely to turn her own life into a story, but at the same time to live and experience it as a story as well where each scene is duly staged and immaculately choreographed depicting its own share of lessons learnt. In the same poem, the line- “Who put a gun in my hand?” can be read

as a descriptive register of the omnipresent violence and accession of weapons, in the name of protecting one's land, religion or other assets. It can also be read as the universal quest for freedom and companionship, ignoring the prevalent disparities. Though the theorists from Marx to Nietzsche to Lerner to Bell predicted the decline of religion in the wake of modernization- what we see in the stories woven by Dharker is a stark disavowal of their theoretical assumptions in the way she heralds the abiding presence of religion and spiritual beliefs in a society that has gone astray. They have only become more vocal, more powerful and more threatening. One of its live examples is terrorism in the name of religious beliefs, which encapsulates one of the biggest dangers of our world. The poem, "*Who Made Me?*" is not just the poet's personal mission of purification and salvation, but masterfully blends the present-day concerns of fear and violence. What it captures is also a terror of anonymity, of not being able to leave one's mark on the world. It signifies the possession of the body and mind by the unlawful agencies. This sense of existential panic, which may take the form of an abstract loneliness is in reality experienced by those suffering with redoubled intensity.

Panic, nausea, schizophrenia, hysteria, estrangement, and madness feature in the line- "Whose hand should I bite?" ("*Who Made Me?*" p.34) We discover aspects of her preoccupation with this "who" as the one responsible behind the chaotic downfall of humanity, and she asserts sardonically about the whole system which is at function to uphold the most devastating expression of cruelty and physical and mental slavery. It is her sympathetic effort to put forward how these clashes shall always keep interfering with the peaceful realm, which we as a community try to build. The crumbling down of community values are brutally murdering the ideal, causing most of us to feel abandoned with our own set of fears. So, while we claim to be self-reliant, she counters us with the shocking realities which continue to make us repressed. Nobody knows when an impending tragedy can hit, and all our theories shall betray us at that moment. Immodest destiny will take charge and all the grandeur that we boast of, will be destroyed. Our lives are constantly in mortal danger and the poet's job here is to make us aware of the same. Of course, only if we wish to listen.

A complex, magnificent and poignant story is told in the poem- "*Before I*" explicating the fact how little individual agency counts in the fast-paced life, and how personal initiatives are suppressed by manipulative imperatives as evidently portrayed when she says- "This is what was happening before, before the planes came in." ("*Before I*", p.38) In writing about the defeat of the speaker, she captures the overwhelming force of the human race to be the best, to know it all. In this poem, "home" is not posited as the transcendent, disembodied and internalised third possibility. It is the only actual thing. It is not the alternative. It is the only

reality. However, the signifier “home” doesn’t relate to some national or geographical signified; but the tactile images, the body as it moves in the orbit of the family, of relationships, of daily mundane tasks like putting the kids to sleep and waking them up, of thinking about what to pack in their lunch box, of listening to songs and walking bare foot across the floor. It is not the constant movement which is a cause of worry, but rather the acknowledgement that she would never be able to achieve a fine balance between the two. The longing for her left behind domesticity, and its daily trivia is the dominant concern. This border zone is often characterised by things falling apart on the political or ideological level in her poetry. The problematic question of home in this poem talks about the erosion of a stable self across the cultures in the modern world. “We could all stand here/ until it comes right.” (“*Before I*” p.39) This line talks about the issue with belonging to the home, which is discussed above. The construction of this home is arbitrary, and therefore surrealistic in its structuring. The nostalgia is the memory of the same home, which the speaker in the poem takes along in travels, but which keeps altering its architecture with every new situation. However, it is not mere flirting with nostalgia. There are inherent suspicions about what comes next. These questions conclude in hopelessness of never really coming to terms with the idea of “home” as in the speaker’s head. This occurs against the setting of the global shift from the thought of “having enough to survive” to the logic of monopolistic capitalism- where everyone wants to command everything, putting at stake their very self, home, peace and moral fabrications. There will never be an end to this ceaseless quest, because there will never be an end to human’s greed. The constant mantling and dismantling of the self in a makeshift world informs us about the same trajectory of failed efforts towards liberation. The escape is impossible. The idea of belonging to a place shall always remain the same provocative question, and our contribution can possibly be just adding perspectives, which too shall not bring a change or provide a satisfactory answer.

Surrounded by all the technological wonders, Dharker portrays humans who appear at the very edge, as a tiny dot in the bottom right corner. Our minds are contained in the elaborate designs for gaining wealth, and we are unable to hear the sound of a dreadful premonition. Relating to the absence of love, the poet also declares the estrangement a woman feels while her husband is away from home, on the usual mission to gather money. She has been trying to communicate with him, but the time has always fallen short. Struck by the hysteria of competition, the partners could never have even a proper moment to simply put their feelings into words. In the poem, “*Black and White*”, this is the reason why we do not immediately pick up the design. It’s important to understand the deep sigh as she writes- “...still you, put my

arms around you.” (*Black And White*” p.41) The desire is simple, yet so complex if we relate to it in a world which moves by having dinner while finishing deadlines, texting over phone while enjoying a movie at the theatre. The speaker in this poem wishes to hold her partner, but to her dismay, she realises that it is not “him”. It is a person who is thinking about the next EMI instalment which is due, the business project to invest in and the shares where he is incurring loss. It is not “him” anymore. It is a machine, whose fuel is more and more materialistic gains. Their tattered relationship which lacks love and affection is depicted in the line- “for you to read, the words we have been assembling.” In the face of much suffering, a relationship that has become clinical comes across. Words don't make sense, and words cannot help them. The speaker hopes for some sort of illumination; but, as readers, we know that it is in vain. Her words can never match the speed of internet. They are lost in between the numerous signals. Hence, the assembling and rearranging of words shall always go on.

The poem- “*These Are the Times We Live In I*” remarks on a dreaded anxiety of the modern world- the inability to accept differences. Well into the twentieth century, modernization was widely viewed as a uniquely western process that non-western societies could follow only in so far as they abandoned their traditional cultures and assimilated technologically and morally “superior” western ways. (Inglehart, E. Baker 2000) Our ignorance of the other probably stems from the years of subjugation and the illusion which told us that there is only one standard. Anything that doesn't mould up to that standard, or that doesn't conform is bluntly disregarded. The treatment of immigrants like remote creatures, and them being bound to be looked at suspiciously is a sentiment which the poet doesn't frequently address, but when she does, it is with all the clarity. The poet's apprehension is visible when she says- “But what do you expect? It's a sign of the times we live in.” (*These Are the Times We Live In I*” p.45) She has opened up a prominent crevice, by knowing it's risk only too well, and speaks of her mind's terrors in precise images. In such episodes of falling and drowning, the mockery of the widespread intolerance runs together with the stress of such experiences. Only those who choose to live in oblivion shall be offended by her stand. The speaker in this poem sets out to explore humanity in a world, which though has become increasingly connected through planes- shall always remain divided in the form of passports. The line- “...but they missed out your heart” (*These Are The Times We Live In I*” p.45) interrogates the status of humanity versus modern scepticism. While identifying the taboos associated with displaced people, Dharker also mentions her attempt to write about the deep and fundamental commitment towards building a more tolerant, plural, vibrant intermixture of cultures and

communities. The poem advocates to put an end to the steady erosion of humane and secular values.

The rupture of morality finds an echo in the poem- "*Train to Granada*" as well, when she faintly describes the longing for a peaceful life- "...the hint for a fuller, softer life" ("*Train To Granada*" p. 67) Being tired of wars and competitions, the speaker looks for a safe haven. However, here, the haven isn't taken as the concrete home. It simply lies in peace and a promise of rest. This need for rest confirms how the most basic requirements have become a privilege. The fuller, softer life which she talks about here is the life which is picturesque and harmonious. It is the life where the tapestry of differences will be considered just and genuine, and there will be no trials to formulate any standard or code to adhere to. One will be equally appreciable of the narratives, that one doesn't fit in. It is this deduction that we may assume to be her idea behind saying- "the jewel inside the fruit" in the poem- "*Inside*" Here, she microscopically examines the ornamental compositions of concrete, like marble, gold, fountains, pools and rather exaggeratedly claims that none of these can ever hold the treasure and beauty, like that in a plain fruit. The text of this poem has been cunningly modulated in anticipation of the changes that she foresees. For her, poetry is hope. And it is in this hope, where one can find the purpose of this poetic collection. She intends to start afresh, to draw new lines- if at all lines must exist.

To sum up, Dharker miniaturises the problems of a world perplexed by divisions in the form of human beings who are not even counted in the larger scale. These are ordinary people whose actions can be categorised as insignificant, and they don't contribute to the socio-political accounts. However, looking with an eagle's view, we realise that howsoever small their participation may be, they still constitute the smallest segment from where contemporary ideologies take birth. They can never inspire a revolution, but they do encourage their peers. And since humans have a tendency to imitate, we can understand how the consequences of this cannot be ignored. Dharker also seems to be in search of clarity, but gets lost in the intricacies of multiple experiences and episodes and the crude idea gets entangled in the continuous flow of thoughts. But, the consistency of her ideas is indeed remarkable. She puts forward the vision for a community, which has forgotten its roots in affection and inclusivity. Even if her attempts to reinterpret the disintegration may be on a very local plane, it does manifest the destruction that seems incipient. Her focal point is to make us aware of our indecisiveness and to find better substitutes for our inner gratification. The commercial success is only giving us a temporary compensation and very adroitly camouflaging the long run failures, which thereby not only affect us; but everyone in our vicinity. Dharker talks about the inclusive nature of social

disintegration, which will probably affect and encompass even those who were not a participant of the flawed motives and actions.

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