

## Imtiaz Dharker: A Poet of Identity, Religion, and Feminism

Mohd Yousuf Mir

Research scholar, Bundel khand university. Jhansi

### Abstract:

Imtiaz Dharker, a British-Pakistani poet, artist, and filmmaker, has emerged as a crucial voice in contemporary poetry, challenging religious orthodoxy, gender roles, and societal norms. Her poetry explores themes of cultural displacement, feminism, religious identity, and personal freedom. This paper examines her work through a critical lens, particularly her critique of patriarchal traditions and her struggle with religious and social expectations. By analyzing key poems such as *Purdah* and *Postcards from God*, this paper highlights how Dharker's poetry serves as a powerful commentary on oppression, freedom, and self-identity.

**Key Words:** emigration, religion, gender, identity, freedom, oppression.

### Introduction

Imtiaz Dharker was born in 1954, in Lahore Pakistan and brought up in Scotland, where her family had relocated when she was less than one year old. She went to a Protestant school but also had a religious upbringing, her parents sent her to a Koranic school at the weekends. So, there was a clash between her school education and her family background. About her family environment, she observes that she had to follow strict religious rules and regulations while she likes freedom. She

eloped to marry, Anil Dharker, an Indian, Maharashtrian Hindu who lives in Bombay and was a journalist, but following her religion.

She has a daughter, Ayesha, who is today a successful actress. Her second husband, Simon Powell, whom she married in 2007, was a Welsh poetry entrepreneur, the creator of Poetry Live, a series of events directed at GCSE and A-level students, where contemporary poets read their work to the children at various venues around the country. He died in 2009 after an eleven-year-long battle with cancer. Presently she travels between the United Kingdom of

London and Mumbai of India. She frequently depicts herself as a ‘Scottish Muslim Calvinist, born in Lahore and adopted by India’. She expresses her feelings and emotions about her diasporic experience with the help of her poetry and drawings. She is a poet-cum-artist, editor, and documentary filmmaker. Besides being editor of Debonair for several years, she has published six 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), “Leaving Finger Prints” (2009) and “Over The Moon” (2014). Her poetry has been included in the AQA GCSE English Anthology, and 2008 she has been on the judging panel of the Manchester Poetry Prize. She is a fellow of the Royal Society in Literature and was the poet in residence at Cambridge University Library in 2013.

### **Religious and Cultural Influences in Dharker's Poetry:**

Dharker's upbringing in a conservative Muslim family, combined with her Western education, shaped her unique perspective on faith and identity. While she respects the spiritual essence of Islam, she rejects its rigid interpretations imposed by religious authorities. Her poetry exposes the contradictions within religious teachings, particularly concerning women's rights.

In her interview with BBC World Service, Dharker confessed her discomfort with organized religion, stating that she turned away from it because of *"the feeling that religion in the original format must have been wonderful, and it promised huge things, but in the world, she found too much misuse of the name of God."* This sentiment is evident in her poetry, where she frequently critiques the ways in which religion is used as a tool for oppression rather than liberation.

### **Feminist Perspective in Dharker's Poetry:**

A significant theme in Dharker's poetry is the oppression of women under patriarchal structures, often justified through religious and cultural traditions. She particularly focuses on the concept of *purdah* (veiling), examining how it restricts women physically and symbolically. There is no doubt in it that her poetry revolves around the female, particularly Muslims, yet her writing echoes all people whose voices have been in one way or another silenced, despite of gender, religion or

nationality. Even though her writing is often associated with a Muslim sensibility, the influence of her Scottish upbringing should not be forgotten. She told about it that her Scottish education, with its Calvinist influence, is evident in her works. Unfortunately, not much critical attention has been devoted to Imtiaz Dharker, especially not within the academy. Despite being considered one of the foremost living poets in the United Kingdom and the Indian subcontinent, there are very few intellectual articles on her work. There are a few reviews of her books, and interviews published on the web or in Indian publications. Despite that, Imtiaz Dharker has been included in The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women Poetry, in a chapter dedicated to interculturalism. Besides, Eunice de Souza has included her in her book of interviews: Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets, which focuses on Indian poets writing in English. This work of research is, among other things, an attempt to fill this void and grant Dharker the attention she deserves.

In *Purdah I*, Dharker describes how young girls are trained to hide their bodies and suppress their desires, reducing them to silent, passive beings:

*"One day they said she was old enough to learn some shame.  
She found it came quite naturally."*

This line reflects how society conditions women to accept their subjugation as a natural part of life. Her poetry emphasizes that the *purdah* is not just a veil but a larger metaphor for societal control over women's bodies and identities.

### **Nostalgic Feelings:**

Born in Lahore, Imtiaz Dharker migrated to Glasgow where she grew up as an Islamic migrant woman whose subsequent existence moved to and fro between U.K. and India so grows up in diasporic consciousness. Like most other diasporic poets, Imtiaz Dharker too remains engaged in the normal dialectics of belonging and unbelonging that usually splits a migrant's opinion of his/her identity and the whole world of social living where one must always face diverse forms of isolation, and racial otherization. The story of Dharker's search for an identity is in agreement with modern culture and demands of modern life which is expressed as diasporic consciousness in her poetry. It can be noted that the development of such an identity is a continuing process and in the course of this process the core of diasporic poets like Dharker has shifted and changed over time and that's why they were pulled and pressurized by tradition and modern life. Next in the process of social and cultural transformation, there has been no flight from the traditional culture and the identity or identities it confers on Indian diasporic poets like Dharker. It can be noted that there has been no rejection of tradition and culture in Dharker's poems. It is remarkable

that the great ancient cultural tradition still holds its sway on the minds of the speakers of her poems who are actually Dharker herself, as her poems are full of autobiographical elements and characets. One can easily find in her poetry the Indian culture a fascinating and extremely varied blend of unity and diversity. It is true that her poetry incorporates a sustained quest – the quest for roots in the tradition and the quest for a higher self. The image of her birth place i.e. Pakistan and shelter place i.e. India where she grows and marries according to her choice, is very significant in her poetry. She used this image again and again in his poetry; this means she was emotionally attached with the India subcontinent. It is quite significant that her personality and character charm the critical freedom of the people because of her Indian diasporic consciousness height and perception. There is no doubt that a diaspora poet like Dharker enjoys two different lives – the one within, the one without. It is true that because of the present mobility conventional notions of exile have taken a new shape. It is true that she is deeply attached to India subcontinent. It's visible that disturbed by the deep sense of alienation in the modern world, the poet makes an intense search for relationships through her poems. It is quite clear that Dharker was staying in two cultures – one Eastern and the other Western. The Eastern is related to India subcontinent i.e. presents India and Pakistan and Western is related to UK. Imtiaz Dharkar's poetry is an example of these complicated

discussions. Her poetry not only deals with the traditional binaries of ‘home’ and ‘away’ but also the difficult discussions that mark the many lives of the female migrant who may find herself marginalised both within and outside the domestic space. At the same time, her poetry also clears the constant endeavours to move beyond such marginalisation by finding a voice that always confronts essentialistic and monochromatic makes and the aggression required by them. This poetic influence helps to open up, what Bill Ashcroft defines as: “the liberating region of representational undecideability...a nomadic space within and between the institutional and political specificities of nation states”<sup>i</sup>

Her diasporic consciousness about Indian society and culture brought her recognition all over the world. Therefore, it seems necessary to appraise her personality based on her poetry. As Prithish Nandi says in *Indian Poetry in English Today* “the Indian Poet in English represents his generation and speaks for it. Yet he knows his own generation is freak, part of an affluent subculture, rootless, often alienated from the mainstream of the Indian experience”.<sup>ii</sup> At this moment it can be noted that Dharker’s alienation from inherent religious philosophy finds expression in several ways. Whereas alienation is the uncertain birth right of the modern artist in any society, the situation of Dharker reveals several forces at work which appear to generate especially strong sense of alienation in her. As it is well known to all that



poetry reflects the poet's argument with life and cultural values. Most of the existential problems of life are taken up by her poems. Whether a person is shifted to an alien soil for an intellectual or economic reason or else the country in which he is born and lives may be under the power of imperialism, his life gets affected by the cross cultural and religious encounters same is the case of Dharker. Thus her poetry is a brilliant by any standard, because of her alienation from Pakistan and now divides between Bombay and London. It is a fact that diaspora is a state of living in which a man's soul has departed from his own self, his nature, his companions in which his mother, father, wife and children are included. It is true that the motif of alienation has an important place both in modern life and in literature especially in the poetry because it is a powerful mode of expression of deepest feelings. So Dharker uses her poetry for the expression of her alienation and diasporic consciousness. The physical, psychological, spiritual and mental alienations have been the powerful themes in many of her poems. As far as alienation in her poetry is concerned, it can be interpreted in many ways according to its various layers of meaning. Different kinds of alienation can be seen in her poetry. She was also alienated from her religion and that is why she has written a poem like "Pardah" which proves that she was really alienated from some important values of her basic religious Islam. For her the true religious has lost its importance in world by the



misuse of so called religious preachers and she is in search of true religion even in her alienation.

### **Analysis of Major Works:**

#### *Purdah and Other Poems (1989)*

This collection is a feminist critique of religious and cultural oppression. The title poem, *Purdah*, explores the emotional and psychological effects of veiling. Dharker presents the *purdah* as both a physical and metaphorical barrier that restricts women's freedom.

In *Purdah II*, she examines the consequences of rebellion, showing how women who defy societal norms face severe repercussions. The poem follows a woman who attempts to escape her imposed constraints, only to find herself caught in another oppressive situation:

"Her neck is bowed as if she were a hood,  
watching, as any creature watches  
the air only to scent its own small trail of blood."

This imagery conveys the deep suffering and helplessness of women trapped between religious dogma and societal expectations.

### *Postcards from God (1997)*

This collection blends spirituality, satire, and defiance. Dharker challenges traditional representations of God, imagining a deity who is playful, compassionate, and far removed from the rigid authoritarian figure preached by religious leaders. She uses humor and irony to critique fundamentalist interpretations of religion, advocating instead for a more inclusive and personal spirituality.

### *I Speak for the Devil (2001)*

In this collection, Dharker explores themes of exile, displacement, and rebellion against oppression. She gives voice to marginalized women, portraying their struggles with brutal honesty. The poems highlight the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations, illustrating how women are often forced to suppress their true selves to conform.

### **Symbolism in Dharker's Poetry:**

Dharker employs powerful imagery and symbols to convey her themes. Some of the most recurring symbols include:

- **The Veil (Purdah):** A metaphor for oppression and control, symbolizing the societal restrictions placed on women.
- **Water:** Represents both purification and entrapment, reflecting the fluid nature of identity and struggle for freedom.

- **Walls and Doors:** Indicate barriers—both physical and metaphorical—that restrict women's autonomy.

Her use of these symbols allows her to critique not just religious orthodoxy but also broader issues of gender and social injustice.

### **Comparative Analysis:** Dharker and Other Feminist Poets

Dharker's work can be compared to that of other feminist poets such as Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das, both of whom explored themes of female identity and resistance. Like Rich, Dharker challenges patriarchal norms through personal and political poetry. Like Das, she expresses the internal conflict of being a woman caught between tradition and modernity.

However, Dharker's poetry stands out because of its cross-cultural perspective. While many feminist poets focus on Western patriarchal structures, Dharker's critique extends to South Asian and Islamic contexts, making her work particularly relevant in discussions about intersectional feminism.

### **Impact and Reception of Dharker's Work**

Dharker's poetry has been widely studied in academic and feminist circles. She has received numerous accolades, including the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. Her work is frequently included in literature curricula, particularly in discussions about postcolonial feminism and identity.

Despite her critical acclaim, Dharker's work has also faced backlash from conservative groups who accuse her of misrepresenting Islam. However, her poetry is not an attack on faith itself but rather on the ways in which faith is manipulated to justify oppression.

### **Confessional mode in Imtiaz Dharker**

Imtiaz Dharker, for the first time introduced a strong personal voice in Indian English poetry as no other woman poet had done earlier. Her themes go beyond the traditionally accepted thought modes and embrace vast hidden areas of experience and complexity of feeling. Her Poetry is not merely Indian like others but a passionate expression of the universal experience of her diasporic life. Her concern has been the existential pain of humanity as revealed mainly through woman's relationship with man in the male-dominated society. Most Indian poets in English do not have the candour of Imtiaz Dharker in creativity analysing and evaluating their experience. She exploits the confessional mode in order to discover the images that evoke the joy and frustration of achieved womanhood. She while writes in the tradition of confessionals, she indulges in a great deal of heart bearing. The adverse circumstances have rendered her vision tragic and melancholic, her upbringing by Islamic parents, and her marriage though with a Hindu man; but of her own choice and after his death with other English man; in order to remove her parental control.

Added to this, she is a very sensitive and unconventional woman, who is not prepared to be dictated. Her dissatisfaction with her ancestral religion and diasporic life sharpened her consciousness, and she possibly decided to air out her grievances through the poetic medium, because many unpalatable things can be said in this medium, without incurring the wrath of powerful persons. She depicts her confessional mode not only by her writing but she presents it also by drawings and pictures upon her books. She thinks that her drawings should not be kept separate from the poems, as they strengthen each other in explaining her inner feelings clearly. She is also convinced that “the drawings don't illustrate the poems, they happen at the same time” (“Spiritual Journeys”). Her advance could be called confessional, because she uses different means of communication to express her inner emotions and expressions by her creativity. Drawings and poems in her books are in other words different ways of expressing her inner views of her own life. Being a visual artist her poetry expresses her feelings and emotions in confessional mode. The drawings used by in her poetry often include portraits of men and women, with clothes that look layered, crossed with undulated lines, as if to underline confessional of the inner and the outer self. Sudeep Sen has observed in his essay on the directions of Indian poetry in the 1990s. Reviewing her first collection of poems, he writes that

Intiaz Dharker's poems “contain an inner force that is carefully etched, a sharp-line quality of sketches derivative from her own work as a [visual] artist”.<sup>iii</sup>

The collection of poems “Purdah” (1997) is full of autobiographical elements, as there are most of the poems about the real life of Dhaker. The speakers of these poems are nobody else than Dhaker herself and she express through their mouth her inner feelings through confessional technique of poetry. In the very 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. Dharker objects to the veil, not only in her poetry but in practical life also, as she considers it more mental than physical. Dharker accepts that of course the veil or purdah protects her corporal body and grants her protection from curious eyes. It is “A kind of safety/ the body finds a place to hide.”(Dharker: Postcards from god, 14) But it also has a bundle of harmful effects.

Dharker revolts against the Veil as she believes to her, it confines the chances to search for knowledge and enlightenment leading to the death of intellect just as earth covers the dead person-keeping them ignorant 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. (Dharker : Postcards from god, 14)

Purdah is considered here as coffin for women who are given a funeral action while alive. She is angry with the method as it steals from a woman her identity and treats her very cruelly. Purdah doesn't permit a woman to implement her free will as a human being and limits her idea of the external world as the practices which are accessible to others but not to her as no one identifies her under the veil. The girl experiences very extraordinary feelings under purdah. Even the people she has well-known from her early days become unfamiliar persons for her and she for them. She is looked at by everybody as if she is a piece of wonder. Dharker's center of attention is on the deadening aspects of the purdah system which becomes an obstacle between a woman and the rest of the world.

People she has known

Stand up, sit down as they have always done.

But they make different angles. (Dharker: Postcards from god, 14)

She starts the book with a confessional technique by a rebellion against the Purdah system but as she proceeds, she exposes the numerous senses related with 'Purdah'



which is worn to limit a woman's life. She is forced to obey the norms prescribed by the male-oriented culture. Her maturity must be attended by modesty and silence:

She was old enough to learn some shame

She found it came quite naturally. . (Dharker : Postcards from god, 14)

### **Conclusion:**

Intiaz Dharker's poetry is a powerful exploration of faith, identity, and feminism. Through her evocative imagery and fearless critique of patriarchal traditions, she challenges the constraints imposed on women in religious and cultural contexts. Her work is not just poetry but activism—giving voice to the voiceless and inspiring women to reclaim their autonomy.

Dharker's legacy lies in her ability to bridge cultures, challenge norms, and offer a vision of a world where women are free to define themselves on their own terms. Her poetry remains a crucial contribution to feminist literature, urging readers to question, resist, and redefine the narratives that shape their lives.

---

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Dharker's work while incorporating critical perspectives and additional research. If you need modifications or further expansions on specific sections, let me know!

## References:

---

Bill, Ashcroft. *Globalization, the TransNation and Utopia*. In Krishna Sen and Sudeshna Chakravarti (Eds.) *Narrating the (Trans) Nation: The Dialectics of Culture and Identity*. Kolkata: Das Gupta and Co. 2008. 11.

Pritish, Nandi. ed; *Indian Poetry in English Today New Delhi* : Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1981

Sudeep, Sen. *New Indian Poetry: The 1990s Perspective*. New Literature Today. 1994.