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## MESSAGE



Ahmednagar Jilha Maratha Vidya Prasarak Samaj, Ahmednagar is our parent institution. It is one the pioneer and leading educational organizations in India having 125 independent academic and professional institutions under its umbrella founded in 1918 in memory Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj son of late Karveer Hutatma Chatrapati Chauthe Shivaji Maharaj of Kolhapur. The growth of institution during last 100 years is noteworthy with its moto "Teji si tejo mi dehi" The institution celebrated centenary festival. The main objective of the institute is to impart education to the society irrespective of caste, creed, sex and religion. New Arts, Commerce and Science College, Parner has been established in July 1977. The College is imparting quality education through UG and PG programmes and re-accredited in third cycle with 'A' grade by NACC in 2017. The College prides itself by possessing a rare distinction of having a highly qualified, dedicated and enthusiastic staff. The college has been awarded the Best College by the Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune. The Department offers English as a core subject at UG and PG Level. It runs a Functional English Course. It runs UGC sponsored certificate course in Communication skills in English. It also runs a certificate course in Japanese Language.

It is immense pleasure that Department of English is organising National Level Seminar on Issues in Postcolonial Indian English Literature. Literature is being mirror of society reveals several aspects of ours culture and heritage. I am sure that seminar will fruitful for delegates, research scholars and students. I wish the best luck for the seminar.

Nandkumar Zaware Patil  
President,

Ahmednagar Jilha Maratha Vidya Prasarak Samaj,  
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## Portrayal of Subaltern Existence of Women in Imtiaz Dharker's Poetry

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### Abstract—

*Imtiaz Dharker effectively uses diverse mediums – poetry, painting and documentaries to portray the dilemma and to raise her voice against the subaltern status of women particularly the Muslim women across the world. Through her poetry, Imtiaz Dharker brings forth the issues particular to women – their unmitigated manipulation, their indifference in the face of patriarchy, conformity to norms, and the rampant social hostility. Her writings also focus the tensions resulting from the binaries of custom and modernism; the homeland and the diasporic location of displacement, and between the losing battle of remaining rooted and going global. This paper titled ' Portrayal of subaltern existence of women in Imptiaz Dhareker's Poetry' is an attempt to explore how Dharker through her writings tries to highlight the suppression of women in the society and accentuates why women themselves need to rebel against the ensuing prejudice and repression perpetuated by gender politics.*

**Key words** –Subaltern, Subjugation, Patriarchy, Orthodox,

Imtiaz Dharker focuses the adversities, subjugation and the ceaseless trials and tribulations which women, particularly those belonging to orthodox patriarchal families, face throughout their lives. Through her works, she demonstrates the blatant violation of woman's human rights in terms of freedom of expression, choices and decisions.

Through her collections of poetry particularly 'The Purdah' poems noticeably expose the malicious polarized sensibilities in the Muslim society which she has studied and observed from close quarters, her pragmatic vision encompasses the dilemma and predicament of all those who lead a life of nothingness and anonymity behind both visible and invisible yet invincible Purdah in the non- Muslim world as well. Lamenting the lack of freedom and opportunity to women, Dharker uses her poetry and visual art as a tool to reveal all those women who are downgraded only to hearth and home, and subjected to incessant psychological and physical harassment and anguish by the obliterating prejudiced male hegemonic dominance. Thus, although her focus is more on the Muslim women, her passionate criticism and sharp outburst against institutionalized oppression of women is comprehensive of all women in general.

Dharker's strident uproar against this ill-treatment and dominance is most strongly evident in her collections "Purdah and Other Poems" (1989), and "I speak for the Devil" (2003). Exploring mainly the milieu of home, cultural dislocation, communal conflicts and gender politics, Dharker highlights the utter suffering and struggle of women for empowerment and freedom and the dichotomy between the ideal state of affairs and the reality. Purdah I and II, for example, articulate the atrocities and discrimination meted out to the women who remain passive stakeholders in society and become the voiceless victims of psychological and physical violence generated through the culture of Purdah. Dharker rightly perceives it as a strong mode of isolation and a tool of suppression. Regarded by the Muslims as an essence of female humility, the hijab or Veil is, in fact, a means to control the lives of women on the fragile excuse of

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protection. It not only leads to the physical separation of the two sexes but also imposes on women to hide their form and cover their bodies and head.

Dharker's harsh outburst at the religious intransigence manifests most effectively in her denunciation of the misuse of Purdah as a security against prying eyes of strange men. She not only openly protests against the tyrannical prohibition of the Islamic society but also exhibits her sympathy for all those women who are smothered, restricted and imprisoned by the social constructs under the hegemonic control of the religious fundamentalists. Under the garb of religious commands, unjustified and wicked rules are invented which are harmful to the psyche and personality of women..

A criticism against the institutionalization of irrational and absolute power wrested in the hands of men, the collection "Purdah" out rightly censures the Muslim male dominion which is dictatorial and ruthless towards the female sex. Dharker denounces the duplicity of those men who instead of reining in their own animalism take pride in concealing and imprisoning women. Themistreatment of women which she talks about is not restricted to the Muslim society but has a threatening occurrence in the outside world as well. Subsequently, both the literal and metaphorical Purdah may be deemed as a dual edged weapon for it not only impedes the assimilation of the self in the society but also strains and sifts the outer world and allows only a segment of it to reach the self, concealed behind the mandatory veil. Moreover, it has a far reaching and keen connotation of women as propagators of evil and promoters of lust. A regressive tool, Purdah only leads to depravation and degeneration of the self, leading only, as Dharker rightly says, "To doors opening inward and inward again".

What baffles Dharker further is that even-marriages become an excuse of intellectual and sexual mistreatment. Ideally a relationship of lifelong attachment and sharing, in reality marriages here entail a business deal between men involving financial transactions or sheer convenience. Denied any say, preference or individual choice, women have no option but to accede to the edict and endure a life of humiliation and suffering. Dharker potently portrays the insalubrious business prepositions where the sale and purchase of women is a rule even in the diasporic world. She posits thus:

1. They have all been sold and bought
2. The girls I knew
3. Unwilling virgins who had been taught
4. Especially in this stranger's land to bind
5. their brightness tightly round,
6. whatever they might wear
7. in the purdah of the mind. (PAOP 7)

Dharker, thus, questions the fairness of the domestic spaces within the male-controlled society which downgrades women to sheer drudgery and perceives them only as an object of sexual pleasure, an implementer and a breeder of future. Tormented by the misrepresentation and misreading of religion, Dharker even questions the justness of religion. Ideally the guiding force in life, it in place of giving relief and justice becomes atool of inequality, mistreatment, violence and domination of women. She indicts the tyrannical prescriptions of the Islamic social and religious setup which denies anhonorable identity to women, compelling them to pander to the male ego and fancies. Deeming it as a bold... of women's liberty to dress and express,







she uses her poetry to subtly protest against this tradition. Dharker ridicules the convention of ideal manner expected from women in 'A Woman's Place', wherein she writes

1. Mouths must be watched, especially
2. If you're a woman. A smile
3. Should be stifled with the sari-end. (PAOP 12)

Indeed, it is not only the Muslim community but also the male-controlled conventional Hindu families, particularly in the rural India, which impose prejudiced and obstructive decrees on the female sex. All freedoms pertaining to education, health, food and respect are reserved for the men folk and women exist on the margins-unwanted, uncared for and unsung. The world may be changing for the better but the extremists, regardless of religion, resist change and any attempts at introducing value-oriented modernity. Insisting on conformity to age old outdated customs, they vocally condemn, hinder and resist any attempts to initiate women liberation in the society. Cognizant of the dichotomy between the isolation, the seclusion, the imprisonment and the slavish existence of women in the Indian Sub continent on one hand, and the growing number of liberated, emancipated and empowered women in the west on the other, Dharker is intolerant of the polemics of gender inequality. Subsequently, through her works she illustrates and elucidates this universal patriarchal whipping.

Disapproving religious sanctions against women in the name of family honour, in her poem 'Honour Killing' from her collection *I Speak for the Devil*, she avers:

1. This black veil of a faith
2. That made me faithless
3. To myself.
4. That tied my Mouth,
5. Gave my God a devils' face
6. And muffled my own voice. (ISFD 13)

Quite sarcastically, Dharker also presents how a young girl is expected to show humility and restraint and is made aware of her sexuality by others who seem more aware of her physical growth than the innocent child herself:

1. Of careful carrying /What we do not own
2. Between the thighs a sense of sin.
3. One day they said
4. She was old enough to learn some shame.
5. She found it came quite naturally (PAOP 3)

The collection *I speak for the Devil* not only talks about gender issues pertaining to the limited space available to women across religions and societies, it also inspires the oppressed and marginalized women to embark on a journey of introspection, self-discovery and reincarnation. It eulogizes the spirit of womanhood and urges them to revolt and break free from these pressuring and humiliating social ideas. This collection celebrates the new beginning, the rise of a phoenix out of its own ashes for a woman who "taking off the skin,/and then the face the flesh,/ The womb" (ISFD 13), dares to revolt, and eventually finds her own moorings and identity. Dharker urges women to cast off nationality, religion and gender to discover afresh their space, identity and life. Hers is a dynamic and practical feminist voice in Indian English poetry which questions the unfair social practices which hinder the psychological and intellectual awakening of women







and impose a rather paralyzing, shocking and dampening effect on the psyche of women. This aspect is most clearly presented when Dharker equates Purlah to a coffin in the line:

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

Undoubtedly, Dharker uncovers the self-effacing and deadening impact of such restrictions on the awareness and individuality of women across the world. Relegated to mere domesticity, women are expected to cater to the needs of the household and to be at the beck and call of their fathers, brothers or husbands and most often than not they succumb to their fate. In fact, these curbs and restrictions have been so internalized by women down the centuries that they accept and conform to these and in turn become perpetrators of social discrimination and violence against other women in the family. Devoid of option and voice themselves, they have no choice but to mould their daughters to consent to the patriarchal laws. Dharker's poem "Choice" subtly depicts how this transformation seeps into the daughters who too submit to their destiny without fighting and protesting:

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

Correspondingly, Dharker's poem "Another Woman", quite sarcastically, summarizes the ennui and the wearisomeness of the life of a common lower middle class woman whose freedom is restricted to buying 'methi' and for whom the taste of radish is a sign of 'extravagance'. It is, indeed, a ubiquitous phenomenon that a woman, far from being appreciated for her talent and adroitness in managing the domestic tasks, is often mocked, cursed and abused. She cannot even protest for "Nothing gave her the right/to speak" (PAOP 39).

Persistent in her condemnation of the stereotyping of gender roles, Dharker, like most other feminists, condemns the lack of opportunity and freedom given to women. Her poems poignantly depict the dilemma of countless women whose destiny is sealed by men while they remain silent spectators, forced to follow the diktat:

1. This was the house she had been sent to
2. The man she had been bound to
3. The future she had been born into. (PAOP 38)

Thus forced and hurdled into marriage, there is no reprieve for her from this obligatory "domestication". As the title aptly suggests, she is yet again "the Other Woman" in this vicious cycle where man by virtue of being physically robust, self-confident, economically independent and socially empowered continues to be the cause and propagator of sheer suffering and grieving for the woman. Perhaps, death is the only escape for them.

Optimistic that things will change for the better, Dharker urges women to fight for their own rights and independence. She prompts women to give a free rein to their hidden energy and power against their oppressors. Her poem "The Word" evidently suggests this:

1. It is pure power, ....
2. It is waiting to be fed/let loose, one day,
3. When its moment comes,/upon a world unready
4. To be stung from sleep .... (PAOP 50)





For she is positive about the potential of women, as if to stimulate them to their own power, She says:

1. You hold so many possibilities,
2. Just inside the skin
3. You could be any number of things. (PAOP 60)
4. And goes on to assert:
5. The image is never actually fixed
6. Allow, for one moment, your guard
7. To slip, and all the world will catch a glimpse
8. Of the things you have kept hidden all this time. (PAOP 60)

Certainly, it is only through self-realization and re-invention that a woman can succeed in ascertaining her individuality and freedom from the constrictive and intolerant social and religious norms.

Thus, Dharker's poetry while subtly rebellious gives a whiff of the prophetic and forthcoming change in the insight and consciousness of the society. She anticipates this revolt which will accord equality and liberty to men and women. Her words "At last a sign, behind the veil, of life" (9) may be construed as prophetic for there are noticeable signs of transform. Essentially, voices like that of Dharker show hope of better tomorrow for the silent may silenced stratum of society, who are the dehumanized victims of segregation and partial social and cultural paradigm. In highlighting the feudal convention in the world, she unravels the tension and conflict between the idealistic and the realistic status of women- their subaltern existence at the margins of the society. However, her agonized protest is not merely aimed at revealing the discord but an attempt to unite the two binaries so as to merge the apparently undefeatable dichotomy between the ideal and the factual position of women in our society.

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