IMTIAZ DHARKER’S SELF: DOCUMENTATION AND AUTHENTICATION

Archana Bagga
Assistant Professor, Lakshmibai college,
Delhi University, Delhi, India
Email: archana.bagga@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Imtiaz Dharker is a well-known name in discussions pertaining to Indian English poetry as well as female identity. Like her contemporaries, Dharker undertakes to explore and discover her identity through her subjectivity. The paper attempts to read and analyze some of Dharker’s poems and evaluate her contribution to both, Indian writing in English as well as (Indian) feminism. In highlighting similarities as well as differences between various women (and also men), she provides both a critique as well as re-appropriation of hitherto accepted ideological terminology.

Keywords: Indian Writing in English; Women Writing; Imtiaz Dharker; “Minority”; Purdah; Indictment of Islamic Rituals; Self-Realization; Women’s Identity Crisis and Resolution; Humanitarian Beliefs; Women’s Right to Speech and Language

INTRODUCTION

Indian writing in English flourished in the latter half of the 20th century. Quite naturally a feminist perspective also emerged in the Indian English writing/poetry during the postmodern period. The women poets did not shy away from undercutting the tyrannical principles of the prevailing patriarchal structure. Moreover, their poetry was a sort of open rebellion against their male counterparts who depicted women (writers) in a limited set of roles. Post independence India saw women writers talking freely not just about their selves but also their bodies and sexualities, adding to the Indian poetic discourse a richness of their own experience on their own terms. Women have been writing since the dawn of time yet 1960’s saw the advent of a new kind of Indian English poetry by women writers such as Imtiaz Dharker, Eunice de Souza, Mamta Kalia, Kamla Das, etc, whose voices were sure to be acknowledged as protest. Their writings assert their identity as free intellectuals who are capable of balancing the inside and the outside equally well. They no longer need male members to act as their shield (read cage). These writers undertake to write in English but possess an Indian spirit. Their writings bring to light hitherto unnoticed perspectives that possess the power to turn the world of assumptions upside down.

Imtiaz Dharker (Born 1954) is one important name in the history of Indian English literature as well as feminist fields. The aim of this article is to understand how Dharker challenges some of the accepted stereotypes of Indian/ Pakistani women and project them in a compassionate light. Also, in her poetry, which is accompanied by drawings, she attempts to portray herself, along with the other women, in a subversive light. For her, those women who stand up and struggle for themselves are the real protagonists rather than the meek role models given to us by the patriarchal regime. Dharker has published five books till now, namely- Purdah (Oxford University Press 1989), Postcards From God (Bloodaxe 1997), I Speak For The Devil (Bloodaxe 2001), The Terrorist At My Table (Bloodaxe 2006) and Leaving Fingerprints (Bloodaxe 2009). Through this collection of poetry she has tried to formulate an identity which undermines and overthrows the norms that chain women until death.
Women have felt united throughout the nation (as well as outside) in challenging the hitherto powerful group and in expressing their desire to discard that veil of invisibility which had withheld them from asserting their will. Through her collection of poetry, Dharker is projecting herself as a woman who is acquainted with the ways of the world. This has brought about awareness in her to expose the hypocrisy that makes women’s (and other minority groups) lives miserable. She also elaborates on the stance that women need to attain the freedom to comment on the world. In writing from a first as well as third person narrative, Dharker draws attention to the fact that women too can have an overarching view of the world encroached by men, or more appropriately, masculinity. For Dharker, ‘Woman’, who has always been marginalized, holds the centre stage now due to her enlightened and humanitarian beliefs.

In the poem, “Minority” (From: Postcards from God Publisher: Viking Penguin, New Delhi, 1994), she starts with the first person “I” calling herself a foreigner. Apart from hinting at her adopted land London, it is bent on reflecting her unwillingness to approve the customs of her native place, Pakistan. “Born a foreigner” she highlights and “to become a foreigner everywhere” has been a part of her awakening. The “everywhere” is added to depict how it is not just in Pakistan but elsewhere too that women are subjugated. This grants her poetry applicability in all social scenarios, where women are underprivileged and enjoy no status at all. She takes on this foreigner status to not just observe but also comment on the ill treatment of all those at the margins. Her stance throughout her poems is that of a conscious feminist and political observer. Her poems try to gather that momentum which can activate women’s movement out of the prison of patriarchy. She explores this idea of imprisonment in the book, Purdah. For Muslim women, wearing the black veil ensures social acceptability. And discarding it results in expulsion or displacement. She understands this displacement not as an exile but as a means of self-exploration and expression. This impetus to carve out that niche for oneself gives her the freedom to undercut and discard all that is orthodox and unwanted. She leaves that decision on herself as on other women, rather than institutions signified by the “fat old fools”( From “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country”. Published in I Speak For The Devil. Publisher: Penguin Books India, 2003). “Minority” is all about hope. There is always resistance and upheaval to suppress the towering voices, yet there is hope. There does come a day when you come across a stranger and:

Realize you know the face
Simplified to bone.
Look into its outcast eyes
And recognize it as your own. (“Minority”)

“Minority”, as the title suggests, is the group of women which has always remained marginal. Their voices have always gone unheard, unregistered and unacknowledged. Dharker seeks to question the authenticity of stereotypes. Therefore, the stigma attached to this minority is ultimately on the verge of erasure. The narrator, that is, Dharker herself, by the end of the poem registers the presence of that stranger(s) who will ultimately help this minority to get noticed. The stranger of course is one person representing the entire radical group. Like “Minority”, many of Dharker’s poems talk about the woman-question in one way or another. “Purdah I”( From: Purdah Publisher: Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989), for instance, is a poem about the multiple meanings the black veil can hold for a Muslim woman. Traditionally, purdah is supposed to signify safety and security offered by one’s family. In recent times, its meaning has been deciphered as an entrapment of not just women’s sexualities, but also their identities. Purdah has always acted as the symbol of patriarchal rule and not just in the Islamic world. It is, then, truly ironic that a veil which is supposed to safeguard you from that powerful gaze, is itself endowed with that kind of patriarchal power. The custom of purdah is an imposed identity or a lack of original identity, one which does not give women the possibility of freedom of choice. As soon as a woman is “old enough”, patriarchal and religious heads cast the net and restrict women’s body movement. A follow-up of this is a rule-book of what is acceptable and what is certainly not. Women’s sexualities are certainly not acceptable and therefore purdah grants the body “a
“Purdah II” is a severe indictment of Islamic rituals and all things associated with it. Dharker writes as a “foreigner” examining the kinds of oppression women undergo in the name of religion. With the examples of Saleema and Naseem, she broadly categorizes the types of women Islam either acknowledges or disowns. Saleema is the object figure “bought and sold” umpteen times, yet her “neck is bowed”, “eyes still tragic.” All her trials at rebellion end up in her marrying once again, becoming a wife, caught in the politics of stereotyping all over again. Dharker depicts and interprets a very important trope here. She highlights the impact of films on Saleema. Films act as a vital ideological instrument in any society. Although films possess an extreme revolutionary potential but the most popular cinema disseminates the so-called upheld ‘standard’ views of those in authority. So, she examines how literature and films have given/ still give monolithic acceptable models of female behavior which have proved disastrous for the female psyche. Saleema’s body becomes a site of this ideology to flourish further. Her interpellation in the patriarchal law comes full circle when the reader realizes the extent to which she is tortured, yet willing to beg “approval from the rest”. It is as if her choice does not exist at all. On the other hand is Naseem, the girl who revolts against religious marriage, customs and its authority, not by living an independent life but by adopting the institution of marriage in an altogether different locale. She marries a white man, with his different set of values, only to realize that her situation is not so different from Saleema. Saleema is a sex-object, whereas Naseem is a dead object. Naseem marries that Englishman to get the freedom that she could never imagine in her homeland. She escapes the clasp of Islam only to render herself objectified on an alien soil. But both women remain indistinguishable. Dharker’s political instance accuses the Islamic culture which is the hub of male dominance, nonetheless other nations/ religions are not spared a moral check. Naseem represents many such women who struggle throughout their life only to be remembered among the dead as “ghosts”.

Dharker exposes this appropriation and exploitation of women’s bodies and severely disapproves of such atrocities. Her poetry is all about her defiance on behalf of all those whom she considers a part of herself and vice-versa. Dharker ends the poem by calling on all those women whom she, it appears, is studying with an objective eye. Yet, she never seems distanced from them, her eyes never objectifying womanhood as her male counterparts. But she does not spare women for their complicity with the entire system either. In her attempt to bring them out of the spell, she is questioning them as to what benefit their commitment towards patriarchy has reaped. The authority invested in the purdah, it seems, has been torn apart. She explains how this purdah becomes an internal part of a muslim woman’s reality only to leave her powerless. Gradually, she finds herself incomplete without it, feels at home under its shelter in an alien place, oblivious of its effect on her own psyche. Dharker seems to appeal to her female counterparts to uncompromisingly reject this ‘male-gaze’ and take control of their own lives.

The intention to break away from such an existence requires more than just a disposal of the veil. It needs women’s active participation towards self-representation and self-appropriation. The first step here is to obtain the right over language. Language has been another uncontested zone so far. But now women all over the world recognize the importance of questioning and challenging the authenticity of (phallocentric) language. “The Right Word” is a poem about how any one thing or an image can have manifold connotations. This is a clear attack on the univocal monolithic view given to us by religion working hand in glove with state patriarchy. Dharker indicates how even the common sense has been polluted by patriarchal agendas, for example, Dharker realizes that the image which first seems to be a
terrorist is, by the end of the poem, just another boy. The use of the word “child” bestows upon him an innocence, whereas other terms such as “terrorist”, “martyr”, “guerilla warrior”, “hostile militant” impose upon him an exteriority that plant him in a worldly masculine domain as well as in an ideological discourse. Patricentric discourse starts laying claim on people’s lives from a very young age, rendering them hapless and transfixed. Dharker takes upon herself to rescue that innocent being that was on the verge of losing himself to the worldly manipulations. Here, this child can stand for any person who feels lost in this world by the burden of the image imposed upon her/him. The change in description of the image lurking in the shadows conveys a very powerful point of identities never being static. All the cultures do not take into account this flux, thus immobilizing people and their identities. Any single person can be many things and yet be none. In this poem, she explores how a person, who is for one country/people a terrorist, can be for another country a freedom fighter. In this way, she challenges the traditional stigma associated with the word “terrorist”, an outsider. Dharker reveals how this terrorist looks like her son, or maybe the reader’s child, only to highlight the fact that this person has all the faith, respect and politeness as any other normal person. The only difference (or perhaps similarity?) is that his self has been caught up in the web of stereotypes which is difficult to rupture. For her bit, Dharker sweeps away such prejudices as grains of dirt. In the act of opening the door for that boy, Dharker makes it apparent that she does not believe in stereotypes and is willing to take that one step forward. Moreover, in attempting to decipher reality from multiple perspectives, her poetry has affinity with postmodernism.

Needless to say, Dharker’s boldness alienates her and “they” say “She must be from another country.” “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” (From “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country”. Published in I Speak For The Devil. Publisher: Penguin Books India, 2003) is another poem condemning the hypocrisy of institutions like state and religion. In this poem, Dharker brings to the forefront all the treacherous elements that have become inherent parts of any authoritative segment. Dharker fails to understand why they burn books (curbing freedom of speech), slash paintings, “ban the film”, “can’t bear to look at god’s own nakedness”, can’t tolerate any other way of/pronouncing words but their own, why one’s race and sexual choice is their business, etc. most obviously the “they” in this poem, as in others, refers to the people at the apex who feel that what they do or say is the only reality. All other options are deviations, therefore termed alien. In their country, they do not expect people, especially women, questioning the functioning of the state. Dharker takes on a first person narrative which not only asserts her tremendous confidence but also gives her a prospect to posit a counter narrative. She flaunts her difference from the “fat old fools” and “thugs/who wear the uniform” who have done nothing to women except inculcable harm. She adopts a promising stance towards the end by situating herself away from her indigenous place which demoralizes and dehumanizes natives. She declares her comradeship with others by revealing the “us” element which is there to support her goals. This boundary less, borderless country “where all of us live” is the cynosure of the poem which represents the ultimate victory of humanity. Borders and boundaries are again symbols of authority. Therefore, Dharker seeks to discover in the cracks and fissures the innumerable possibilities that the universe holds. She is proud enough to say at the end:

I never learned your customs.
I don’t remember your language or know your ways.
I must be from another country.

CONCLUSION

Imtiaz Dharker draws attention to this new kind of Indian writing in English which has feminist and political overtones. Her presence in this emerging literary zone has been duly acknowledged by now. By discarding the stereotypical expectations from a (Pakistani) woman writer, she is credited for opening countless possibilities for other budding/ established writers. Her poetry is not about self-reflexive introspection but about self-belief in the potential to bring about a change by evoking the
consciousness to the hypnotized masses. The love that she talks about is not the heterosexual love, but selfless love and sympathy towards fellow beings.

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