



Thematic and Linguistic analysis of Imtiaz Dharker's poem "Purdah" and "Postcards from God"

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Abstract: Marginalization, by definition, has been a frequently discussed term. The world has been divided into binaries and one facet of those sides is usually privileged over the "OTHER." For instance, in the male/female dichotomy, males are favored over females which distances women from central attention and makes them a commodity. And when the world starts seeing a woman or a girl as an object, she seeks refuge and responds to their comments by taking recourse in "Purdah". In Imtiaz Dharker's poem, the word "Purdah" is also used as a metaphor for a girl and woman to respond to people's negative thoughts and comments and retreat into their shells to be safe from disapproval and harm. "Purdah" is also used as an alienation to stop them from doing what they want to do. We can see the heartfelt desires of every woman in a male dominant society in the Indo-English poets, especially Imtiaz Dharker's works. The impact of her paintings adorn her poetry and the issues she holds so close to her and her heart are freedom, religious and social conflicts, and home exile. From the thematic and linguistic point of view, Dharker's only concern is the use of diction, language, and treatment of all social, cultural, and political issues in terms of imagery and symbolism. The purpose of this paper is to thoroughly analyze the Imtiaz Dharker poems "Purdah" and "Postcard from God".

Keywords: Marginalization, Other, Thematic, Language, Cultural Issues, Imtiaz Dharker poems

1. Introduction

Linguistics and Thematic analysis focus on examining the language and themes used in a text to explore hidden meanings and deeper insights. Thematic analysis deals with interpreting, identifying, and analyzing the major ideas and themes within a literary piece of work. It looks at the hidden meanings and narrative to discover societal implications. On the other hand, linguistic analysis deals with the way elements of stylistic, diction, and syntax contribute to the emotional and overall meaning of the text.

Imtiaz Dharker is Pakistan born British writer. She has also directed and scripted a lot of films and audio-visuals whose main focus was on rehabilitation centers, education, and reproductive health for children and women. She was born in Pakistan but moved to England with her parents and was raised there. She was married to an Indian Anil Dharker. Hence this shift from one culture to the other gave her broad exposure to different issues and complexities of society (SHOUKATALI, 2016).

She belongs to a peer group of post-independence women poets who proved that Indian English poetry is not only good but it is here to stay. She is one of the best poets among Kamala Das, Sujata Bhatt, Mamta Kalia, Jara Patel, etc. These women not only widened their horizons through poetry but also proved that poetry can be effective,

simple, evocative, and suggestive too. She has also talked about the twofold freedom of women- consists of freedom of soul and freedom of the body (de Souza, 2008).

Her poetry is the voice of confidence and she speaks without any sense of guilt. Her poetry shows her reaction towards the darkest sides of society. The main themes of her poetry focuses on cultural and geographical displacement, political violence, gender politics, and social injustices. She has spoken of those issues which not everybody dares to talk about. She has most prominently given voice to the downtrodden quota of society. She has become a voice of thousands of those voices who were oppressed. Hence she has straightforwardly criticized those who are portraying the wrong image of the religion Islam with their advantageous cultural customs (DHARKER et al., 2012.).

The poems selected for this research are Purdah and Postcards from God. Both of the poems possess a calm tone yet have the loudest scream of the dark realities. Purdah (1989) explores the various resonances of the veil in order to examine the interior politics. It also portrays displacement as a major trauma of alienation and exile. Whereas, Postcards from God (1994) features a more explicit social critique. The language used to express the intolerance and extremism is terse and flat.

1.1 Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

- How does Dharker's poems reflect the struggles and heartfelt desires of women in a male-dominated society?
- How does the concept of "Purdah" used by Dharker explore women's response to societal alienation and disapproval?
- What are the implications of the female/male dichotomy in the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker, especially in relation to the themes of privilege and marginalization?

1.2 Research Objectives

The research objectives are as follows:

- To explore the ways in which Dharker's poems reflect the struggles and heartfelt desires of women in a male-dominated society.
- To find out the concept of "Purdah" used by Dharker explores women's response to societal alienation and disapproval.
- To describe the implications of the female/male dichotomy in the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker, especially in relation to the themes of privilege and marginalization?

2. Literature Review

This literature will be reviewed by interpreting Imtiaz Dharker's poetry "Purdah" and "Postcard from God". If we analyze her poetry from a feminist perspective, not much work has been done on it. *Simone de Beauvoir*, in her book "**The Second Sex**", explores the myths of femininity, the liberation of women, and women's plight. One of her most famous statements, "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*". She stated that as an independent woman, her liberation lies in her economic independence (de Beauvoir & Green, 1949).

As discussed earlier, *Virginia Woolf* in her essay "*A Room of One's Own*" stated that if a woman wants to write fiction then she must have a room, space, and money of her own. She opines that a woman can only show her writing skill if someone is supporting her financially. She also suggests that a woman must have freedom if she wants to express and show her writing skills (Woolf, n.d.).

Imtiaz Dharker was asked a question by **Helen Bowell** about what made her write poetry and she replied that it is an adventure for her with words and she was attracted to and influenced by the beat, sounds, and words.

Sonja Lehmann in her work "*Transmediality in the work of Imtiaz Dharker: Gendered Spaces in Poetry and Visual Art*" expresses the mutual relation and influence between Dharker's poetry and sketches and how it conveys her thoughts and social issues. His major focus was on "Postcards from God" in which she has talked about religious terror and strife, grief, displacement, and life in slums (Lehmann, 2012.).

Another book was written by Bruce King, "*Modern Indian Poetry in English*", covers all the modern Indo-English poets. His book involved all the major poets like Tara Patel, Charmayne D'Souza, Jayanta Mahapatra, Imtiaz Dharker, and many other poets who have played a major role in modern Indo English poetry. He has analyzed their

work and also commented on Imtiaz Dharker's work that she is one of the few poets who are aware of their thoughts. He described her work as, "consciously feminist, consciously political, consciously that of a multiple outsider, someone who knows her own mind rather than someone full of doubt and liberal ironies." (King, 2004).

According to Arundhati Subramaniam,

"Here is no glib internationalism or modish multiculturalism..... displacement here no longer spells exiles; it means an exhilarating sense of life at the interstices. There is an exultant celebration of a self that strips off layers of superfluous identity with grace and abandon, only to discover that it has not diminished but grown larger, generous, more inclusive." (Subramaniam, n.d.)

So, we can say that the characteristics of Dharker's poetry are a major concern for the social, racial, and religious issues of society. By studying the poems of Imtiaz Dharker, one can see through her thoughts and works and can be aware of the customs, traditions, codes of the Muslim religion.

Dr. Poonam has thoroughly explained the state of mind in both **Prudan I and Purdan II** poems of Imtiaz Dharker. She highlights the conservatism that is still evident in our society and subjugation of women which is the major issue. Purdah I puts light on the life of women and the way they grow up in an Islamic society, whereas, Purdah II focuses on the symbolism of veil and the way it is related to the suppression of women (Dharker, 2018).

According to a study conducted by **Richa Chilana** on the poems of Imtiaz Dharker states that, "*Imtiaz Dharker's poems reveal an interesting interplay of facticity and freedom - the dual forces of the lived body.*" She also highlights the two different sides of veil, one that is associated with suppression and misogyny and the other one which is related to the cultural identity of women (Chilana et al., 2019).

Mark Brennan in his study explored the "*Spiritual Expression Among Disabled Older Adults*". He described the religious expressions that are present in the poem Postcards from God. Those individuals who sent Postcards to God felt calm and satisfied indicate themes of sustenance and abundance as compared to those who did not. It was an spiritual way to promote this connection among adult population and to improve the psychological impact of this whole journey among as they face multiple challenges in their later life including the lose of their loved ones to having health issues. So, the element of spirituality is significant for these individuals as they have to go through a lot in every part of life. He has also suggested multiple ways to improve spiritual well-being to have a peaceful and successful life. "Higher Power" represents a source for stability and assistance for having a stable life (Brennan et al., 2005).

3. Research Methodology

For this study, the data has been collected from Imtiaz Dharker's poems "Purdah" and "Postcards from God" which describe the themes of feminism, life in slums, displacement, religious terror, and women alienation in the modern world. The purpose of choosing Imtiaz Dharker's work is to analyze the poem on the basis of thematic and linguistic approach as not much work has been done on his poetry.

Furthermore, we have specified and pointed out those words that are related to social-religious, political, and racial issues and how Dharker has used images or sketches to portray the darkness and violence of the society. Her black and white canvases are composed of lines, balance, and patterns which are the main aspects of her poetry and show the themes through it.

4. Thematic & Linguistic Analysis of Postcards from God and Purdah

Imtiaz Dharker with her experience as Diaspora has experienced three cultures very closely. Born in Pakistan as a Muslim girl and then raised in England and afterward getting married to an Indian Anil Dharker gave her exposure to three cultures and societies.

Hence she developed a critical lens for her own culture and community which is reflected in her writings.

In Postcards from God, the God is portrayed as traveling through the human world. Here, for the sake of trivial things, God observes the human spirit's floating. The title of this poem also serves as a metaphor as it portrays a strong image of seeking validation or divine connection. It suggests that the experiences of the speaker are deserving of acknowledgement and elevate their sense of existence to something sacred.

In her poem "**Postcards from God**"; in a very calm yet impressive and direct manner, she reminds society about religious teachings and the ultimate creator. She has conveyed this central message that people have forgotten their purpose for arrival in this world. The fact that people have destroyed the very essence and purpose of the creation of this universe is related by Dharker by imagery created beautifully and magnificently where God himself feels alienated or like a tourist who is going to explore a place that is very much new to him. This imagery is ironic that

the universe which was the ultimate creation of the Creator and the Creator himself feels new and is unable to recognize the world which was made by him. The reason is that humans have altered, displaced, and have brought chaos to the place which had the solemn purpose of obeying the creator and doing good deeds. The purpose hence is lost in violence, hatred, and lust.

In this poem, Imtiaz Dharker spoke through the voice of every human being distanced from God. The poet is in dialogue with herself and God. God said that he has lost trust in his "interpreter" including priests, Maulvis and Sadhus who spoke nothing but meaningless babble. She commented on the world of human suffering. She has expressed her anger and frustration against the ruthless world. Postcard from God mediates upon the agitation in Dharker's society, the acts of violence, its insanities and feuds forcing her into complete wakefulness.

"Everywhere you scream my words

But you forget my name" (Dharker, 1989)

In the above lines, Dharker said that everything signifies God's existence and eternity but people have forgotten his commands. They hack out God's name for the violence that they spread.

The question and statement like, *"Who am I speaking to?"* and *"I think I may have misplaced the address."* shows the identity crisis. This shows a search for one's identity in the midst of confusion and dislocation. (Dharker, 1989)

In her poetry, Imtiaz Dharker draws black and white sketches of the society which paradoxically gives multiple contextual interpretations that vary from certain patterns and lines. Intolerance of fundamentalist and extremists found its way to her poems. Self and city landscapes expand to unfold the world in a way that is unapologetic, casual, and playful (Wasson, 2017).

However, the choice of words, symbols, and imagery used in this poem show her linguistic command over the language. The words such as TOURIST and VISITOR show alienation and hence metaphorically God becomes a visitor. It also adds a sense of isolation from the world they once lived in. These words highlight the detachment people might feel in their own space. It also creates an image of an individual who feels weary and out of place from their environment. On the other hand, words such as DISTINCTLY LOST and PROMISED PAST, however, enhances and signifies the theme of this poem. It also convey the feelings of agency and helplessness. Moreover, Postcards from God indicate an image of God as a black canvas that is filled with images, prints, and postcards. She said that he is a "SPACE" that someone has to "Fill".

Phrases such as "pictures postcards" and "battered streets" are create vivid imagery in order to highlight the emotional. The word "postcard" indicates a disjointed experience in the speaker collects moments but does not fully integrate them their identity.

Purdah (1989) on the other hand has a similar rebellious tone is written by Dharker to show her anger and distress against discrimination. The term Parda or Purdah is a Persian word means "curtain" and it was used to hide women from men.

In this poem, Imtiaz Dharker has spelled out women's socialization and acceptance of their gendered cultural norms. She has revealed the double facets of the woman behind the veil. As Virginia Woolf, in her poem *"A Room of One's Own"* said that *"It is better to be locked out than to be locked in."* So, Imtiaz Dharker excites women by telling them to be in Purdah as it is an obligatory part of women's dress in Islam.

The title of this poem, "Purdah" is significant, figuratively. The terminology "Purdah" has a deeper connotation than just a cover or a veil; in fact, it is a typical manipulation of the patriarchy that keep women in a false sense of propriety and safety. Dharker posits, employing Purdah as a metaphor, that the culture and society constructs in order to serve the self-interest of a particular segment of the society. Imtiaz Dharker holds up a symbol of rebellion against traditional religious and societal implications to subjugate and oppress women throughout their lives (Kumar, 2020).

The poem holds a feminist approach with direct criticism on society which is just centered towards the religious sanctions to be imposed forcefully on the women and religious practices to be practiced forcefully and strictly only by women. She has shed light on that society that marginalizes women. This marginalization is not a current issue as it has been going on from the very past. She has depicted Muslim women in an alienated cultural, political and social atmosphere. This poem has forcefully expressed serious feministic and humanistic concerns.

It is clearly visible in the picture accompanying the "Purdah", where the faces are drawn or outlined in straight lines



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and they have darkness around them which symbolizes the dullness and gloominess that is present in this world for women.

There is the representation of two distinct groups of poem about children and mothering in her poetry. Firstly, it is about the way Muslim culture affects the lives of women. It also highlights the way through which the terminology "shame" is used to keep women out of the public eye and to suppress their sexuality to ensue the gap in the feelings and actions of women, particularly in the diaspora situations. Daughter's rebellion against their mothers is depicted in the poetry. However, the mothers are not held in contempt, despite the fact that the difficulties and numerous ambiguities were acknowledged.

Gaytri Spivak's term "other" can also be applied to women even. This specific quota of society is neglected and left out from the very beginning. The fact that women being oppressed are left out of many opportunities as they are targeted through the bullets of religion. The only way to make women shut their mouths is by making them glued through religious teachings. I would like to add this thing specifically that has become the trend even though we utilize and mold Quranic or religious teachings according to our own personal desires. Moreover, she has highlighted how people are using the name of religion and God to fulfill their vested desires and interests.

The ones who impose the veil on women through Quranic Ayats should also know that before the physical veil it is said that men should lower their gaze first. The ones who bound women to the four walls of the house should know that women have the right to education even. The ones who impose marriage proposals without a woman's consent should know that Hazrat Muhammad S.A.W asked Bibi Fatima R.A before approving her marriage to Hazrat Ali R.A. So who are we to create boundaries which were not created by God even?

Imtiaz Dharker sees Purdah in a broader sense than just the act of concealment not just *burqa* as a garment, but as a control over the lives of women. In the culture of Muslims, the isolation of girls who have reached puberty is the primary focus of the purdah practice regardless of whether they are unmarried or married. Numerous books have been published on female education and purdah that offer a variety of perspectives on purdah experiences. Kamala Das's conversion to Islam in the recent years and her burqa became famous in some parts of India as a result of burqendoresement.

The poem holds linguistic properties as Dharker has used imagery. The poem starts with an image of a girl who is reaching puberty hence to save her from the evil eyes of society and to learn shame she has to cover herself with the veil. Then she brilliantly compares Purdah with Coffin and says that just like the dead are covered with coffins, the women are also covered with Purdah holding and covering their dead desires and wishes. "*The words are nudged into the head as pure rhythm on the tongue, unsoiled by sense.*" The mood and tone of Dharker's poem "Purdah" is poise and calm throughout the poem even though she is talking about dehumanizing and degrading effects of prevalent cultural, political and social sanction.

Then she uses the phrase "*between her thighs her sense of sin*", this phrase significantly in a calm yet straightforward manner concludes the very idea and thinking of this society and its rituals which make women feel that they are sinful creatures that need to be covered and not shown.

5. Conclusion

Hence through this research, we can finally conclude with this statement that Imtiaz Dharker is one of those finest female poetesses who can relate and raise voice for their genders, social injustice, cultural displacement without any fear.

Linguistic and thematic analysis reveal the way Imtiaz Dharker's poem captures the complexities of existence, identity, and communication in a dispersed world. A moving look at what it means to live in a disjointed world is evoked by the use of structure and language, which emphasizes the themes of isolation and struggle to find one's place in the world. The speaker's search for connection and meaning has a profound impact, allowing readers to empathize with their sense of loss and longing for recognition.

Being a creative painter, the impact of her painting can be seen in her works. Her works are consciously political, feminist, and of multiple outsiders. Her multiple personalities as she has lived in three different countries makes her a keen observer of the religious anomalies, political riots, and activities and social discrimination, and urban violence. Bruce King has described her as a person who is aware of her own thoughts rather than someone who is full of liberal ironies. She has an instinct for imagery and dramatic structure. Her writings possess not only a staunch central message but also possess brilliant linguistic attributes. The overall structure and figurative language are very efficient and are adding to the brilliance of her ideas that are penned down on paper with utmost efficiency.

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