

## **Unveiling the veil: Critical study of the two Poems "Purdah I &II" of Imtiaz Dharker**

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### **Abstract**

Before the 1950s, the concern of Indian Poetry in English by women was completely different. They generally dealt with the common issues of human relations. Apart from Toru Dutt, no early woman writer in English from India has glorified Indian women or addressed their problems in her poetry. The post-independent Indian women poets are entangled within a broad spectrum of feminist concern that has led them to move far ahead of their predecessors. Imtiaz Dharker has emerged as one of the significant women poets who have challenged the conventions of patriarchy vehemently as part of their strategies to grab the male space. Born and brought up abroad, she was confident enough to oppose her community's orthodox nature in unequivocal terms. Her two poems, "Purdah I" and "Purdah II" are invariably treated as her poetic manifestoes of rebellion against conservative and patriarchal Muslim society. The title of the poem "Purdah" is very significant, literally. It denotes veil or cover but carries a deeper connotation; in fact, Purdah is a typical patriarchal machination that confines the women within the false sense of security and propriety. By using Purdah as a metaphor, Dharker posits how the social and cultural constructs of certain conventions are deliberately used as instruments of regimentation to gratify the self-interest of a specific section of society. Dharker raises the emblem of revolt against the conventional Islamic culture, which through its traditions and customs, attempts to subjugate and subordinate women at each and every phase of life.

**Keywords:** Indian Poetry in English, Purdah, Patriarchy, and Islam.

### **Introduction**

Imtiaz Dharker, was born in Lahore in 1954 in Pakistan. She was raised in Glasgow, Scotland as her parents were migrated there when she was not than a year old. Imtiaz dharker has published six collections of poetry *Purdah and Other Poems* is the first volume of her poetry published in 1988. Her other collections of poetry are *Postcards from God* (1997), *I Speak for the Devil*(2001), *The Terrorist at My Table*(2006), *Leaving Fingerprints*(2009) and *Over the Moon*(2014). Dharker shaped pictures for her poetry on her own. She studied in Britain. Born and brought up abroad, Imtiaz Dharker was confident enough to oppose her community's orthodox nature in unequivocal terms. By doing so, she articulated both self-confidence and resistance which ultimately became the coordinates of her poetry. Among women poets, only Dharker was exposed to the nuances of two religions, the Islam and the Hinduism, one by birth and the other by marriage to a Hindu Anil Dharker. Besides, other socio-cultural influences have also shaped her sensibility, "consciously

feminist" (King 321). The context of her poetry expands from her inner world to the outside reality and even beyond that. It is the constant shift of emphasis from exclusiveness to inclusiveness that makes her poems remarkable. Dharker raises the emblem of revolt against the conventional Islamic culture, which through its traditions and customs, attempts to subjugate and subordinate women at each and every phase of life.

The veil or 'Purdah' is used in the Islamic religion to conceal the body, which is nothing but a means to assert that women are weak and dependent. That is why they are required to be safeguarded and protected from the glaring lustful eyes of men. Dharker finds connotations of gender discrimination in the 'purdah' system that suffocates every Muslim woman's body. Through her poems, she describes the process by which a woman's freedom is curtailed and restricted. A Muslim girl's desire for freedom and independence and her helplessness to break the chains of boundaries of religion, customs and patriarchal supremacy are prominently present in her unpolished words in two poems on Purdah. Her art folds a momentum, which is activated by the oscillation of a woman's two facets i.e., her inner real self and the outer masked self. She has boldly expressed her own experience, which is indicated in her use of the first-person narrative.

These two poems of Imtiaz Dharker unfold an acutely conscious identity of a double marginalized personality, a Muslim and a woman, through her sensitive depiction of the cameo narratives from women's lives, contributing to the accentuation of the pain of living in a chaotic society. The poetry of Dharker attempts to destroy condemnation of the exploitive rules and regulations against the emancipation, self-respect and reverent life of women, particularly in the Muslim community. Dharker asserts that women's social discrimination and religious restrictions have denied them all their possibilities and opportunities, making them psychologically disabled and paralysed. Dharker has honestly portrayed female lives' nuances in her poetry, showing her courage and sensitivity to emotions. Her poems enlighten our sense of right and wrong, the injustice, and mistreatment in the lives of the women on pretext of culture, rules and regulations established by the patriarchal society.

## **Discussion**

In her poems "Purdah I & II" Dharker explores the internal politics of power dynamics by examining into the numerous implications of the Purdah. The first poem "Purdah I" focuses on a significant phase in the life of a girl growing into the youth in a Muslim community. At a young age, her physical beauty attracts people's attention and that is not proper in a conservative society.

Therefore, she must maintain the decency and decorum of a young lady: since "One day they said/ She was old enough to learn some shame/ She found it came quite naturally" (Purdah 14). The woman enclosed within Purdah "stands outside herself/sometimes in all four corners of a room" (14-15). The poet ingeniously decodes the division of a young woman's self-comparing her to a "clod of earth". A broken creature with a deadened mind and an anguished body finds herself miserably incapable and helpless while trying to achieve a balanced personality.

The consequence was a work rich in layer– it speaks of doors "opening inward and again inward", of the slight interaction of advance and move away across "the borderline of skin". (P.15). The title of the poem "Purdah" is very significant; literally, it denotes veil or cover but carries a deeper connotation; in fact Purdah is a typical patriarchal machination that confines the women within the false sense of security and decency. By using Purdah as a metaphor, Dharker posits how the social and cultural constructs of certain conventions are deliberately used as instruments of regimentation to gratify the self-interest of a particular section of society. No doubt, Purdah becomes the symbol of repression, subjugation, subordination and oppression of women. It bases flagrant violation of their basic rights, freedom and dignity, and the individuality of women. However, in Muslim society, it is indispensable for women to be covered from head to foot in the black veil. Purdah's custom absolutely dehumanizes women, since it suffocates their personalities; demeans and dwarfs their self-esteem, and turns them into non-entity where they fail to express themselves as individual persons.

In both the poems, that is "Purdah I" and "Purdah II", the poet interrogates the distorted and deficient reality using poignant images of female exclusions with the Muslim society at its background. The poem "Purdah I" focuses on a significant phase in the life of a girl growing into youth in the Muslim community. In youth, her physical beauty attracts the attention of people which is improper in a conservative society. Therefore, she must maintain the decency and decorum of a young lady since, "she was old enough to learn some shame" (P.14).

Dharker seems to be enormously conscious of Purdah's tremendously negative bearings, which deprive and take away a young woman of the opportunity to experience her life entirely and confined her to the limited space she traverses. The following lines reveal this fact effectively:

Purdah is a kind of safety  
The body finds a place to hide.  
The cloth fans out against the skin  
much like the earth that falls

on coffins after they put the dead men in. (P. 14)

The woman enclosed within purdah "stands outside herself/sometimes in all four corners of a room" (P. 14). The poet explores and deciphers that the situation and circumstances of the woman is no less than the "clod of earth"; she remains as a broken creature with a deadened mind; she finds herself miserably incapable and helpless while trying to achieve a balanced personality. The poet touchingly describes the predicament of a Muslim woman living under Purdah in the following extract:

She stands outside herself  
sometimes in all corners of the room.  
Whenever she goes, she is always  
inching past herself,  
as if she were a clod of earth,  
and the roots as well,  
scratching for a hold  
between the first and second rib. (P. 14)

In the closing lines of the poem, Dharker's attitude to the purdah system becomes still more critical. In the Muslim community, women feel themselves mechanically controlled as puppets in the hands of men and their actions are only determined by the wishes of the male members. Some men look at women only as sexual objects; their exploitation physically, psychologically and emotionally quite often further aggravates their agony. This idea is precisely communicated in the following citation:

Passing constantly out of her own hands  
into the corner of someone else's eyes.....  
while doors keep opening`  
inward and again  
inward. (P. 15)

It is evident that the door opening inward highlights the image of exclusion and seclusion of a woman who only passes her time in a secluded ambiance ignored and unnoticed deliberately by her family members. The poem performs as a vehicle where Dharker directly analyzes, condemns and criticizes the norms and customs of a powerful, rigid and unyielding system where women are repressed, suppressed, oppressed, and subjugated, which in turn obstruct their natural development.

The poem "Purdah II" critiques the rituals and tradition prevalent in Islam ruthlessly. Dharker points out to the shame conventions and practices of Islam, which bring about inescapable torments on women, a religion which preaches humanity but fails to follow it and thus becomes a farce where the maulvis mould these awfully shameless customs according to their petty interests. This long poem divided into several sections vividly portrays how women are ill-treated in the Muslim society, and how they are commodified and how they matter so little even to their families who always remain apprehensive about their position and status within the confines of Muslim society. According to Dharker, a girl child's fate in a conservative Muslim society is sealed from the very birth and with age it gets worse. They are compelled to get married in a traditional arranged marriage. They don't choose their own, but they are forced to accept what is selected for them.

The poem opens with the familial calling for prayer "Allah-U-Akbar". Ironically, these words, which are meant to bring someone near God, "throws black shadows". Although in the strange foreign land, these known words accustomed to the Muslim ears get a kind of comfort because it allows going back into their past, which always appears pleasant when seen from a distance but at the same time, it is absolutely illusory too. This fact is elaborated in the next section of the poem.

The old maulvi that is the preacher of Islam hustles along with Koran's pages, but the recitation of the preaching is based on "pure rhythm on the tongue". The maulvi is insensitive to these holy words; he is only a hoax who endeavors to spread this pretension amongst his followers. They will also become like him with the passage of time. This idea is developed in the succeeding section, where the new Hajji who is just fifteen years of age:

The new Haji, just fifteen,  
had cheeks quite pink with knowledge  
and eyes a startling blue. He snapped a flower off his garland  
and looked at you.  
There was nothing holy in his look.  
Hands that prayed at Mecca  
dropped a sly flower on your Book. (P.17)

This statement clarifies that the so-called holy man who is out to gather religious knowledge performs unholy deeds. In the Muslim society conventions constrict and narrow the personality of human beings, it becomes evident that they are often forced to do such things that they dislike or which exploit their genuine spontaneity. On the other side, the adolescent girl begins to daydream

about this fake hajji; she is aware of the cruel punishment of being scorched in fire after death for nourishing such blasphemous ideas like love for a devout of Allah, but that does not restrict her tiny breasts to swell an inch.

Dharker has condemned the problems of sexual exploitation and harassment which are common in India and also in other countries. Dharker registers her protest against such exploitation where the woman has to surrender herself physically to fulfill the male person's demands. She can't betray herself as she is ready to allow her thoughts to be impure, burning in the heat of love for physical relationship:

You had been chosen  
Your dreams were full of him for days  
Making pilgrimages to his cheeks,  
you were scorched,  
Long before the judgment,  
by the blaze. (P. 17)

In the successive movements of the poem, Dharker points to the disgrace and ignominy that marriage brings to women in Muslim society:

They have all been sold and brought  
the girls I knew,  
unwilling virgins who had been taught,  
especially in this strangers' land, to bind  
their brightness tightly round,  
whatever they might wear,  
in the Purdah of the mind. (P. 18)

One cannot ignore noticing that the Muslim women are objectified, they are sold and bought, those who can afford to buy them according to their purchasing capacity marries them. But whatever these women do even in a highly modernized society of England, they need to put all their achievements under their veil so that their competence remains covered before men who are after all their masters. So they cannot defy the men by attaining more success than them. Muslim men are free to do anything they please, while women should be kept under the police eye of society so that they do not give themselves to the temptation to the "alien hands". The poor Muslim women are reared as not to raise their heads against any oppression. They lose their voice and then gradually passes on to the darkness of silence. No matter whether these women belong to Birmingham or Leeds, they survive only as a shadow, as lifeless entities, which are always cautious

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to "place their feet". Their veils speak of their being blurred creatures who lack the individuality of the human self.

In a sudden movement, Dharker jolts us from the complacency of accepting these dehumanizing customs:

Break cover.  
Break cover and let us see  
the ghost of the girls with tell-tale lips.  
We will blindfold the spies. Tell me  
what you did when the new moon  
sliced you out of Purdah,  
your body shimmering through the lies. (P.19).

She makes us confront the hard reality or the truth behind these deceitful norms which serve no good to women. She relates two sad episodes of two Muslim women Saleema and Naseem both acting as scapegoats of Muslim customs. Although they dared to defy, they turned into "ghosts of the girls". Saleema, who had always known that women ought to be pure and virgin, surrender hers to the love of a foolish, old English artist "and marveled at her own strange wickedness". However, she fell prey to the same degrading regulations of marriage:

Brought and sold, and worse,  
grown old. She married back home,  
as good girls do,  
in a flurry of red, the cousin  
hers or mine, I cannot know  
her annual babies then rebelled at last. (P. 20)

Her rebellion might not demonstrate her as a bundle of some hollow customs; by choosing another man as her husband, she exhibited traces of individuality. Then again, she slithered into the footsteps of her mother and kept on begging approval from others for doing anything. No doubt, within a few years, she began to sniff "... the air/ only to seem its small trail of blood".

Naseem's indifference for the constrictive pronouncement of her community landed her in more hostile circumstances. She had absconded from her home to have the taste of liberation and freedom. That brought shame to her family; she became a blot who only created disgrace and ignominy for her family members. The attitude of the interference of relatives determined the condition of Naseem's family all the more. Employing powerful images develop this idea:

Nassem you ran away

and your mother buried with shame.  
 Whatever we did,  
 the trial was same  
 the tear stained mother, the gossip aunts  
 looking for shoots to smother/ inside all our cracks.( P. 20)

But the most agonizing part of the story is that she is:

The table is laden  
 and you are remember  
 among the dead. No going back.  
 The prayer's said. (P. 21)

She renounces Naseem near ones, the people who remained close to her heart. How excruciatingly painful is the position for a daughter who is still surviving but is totally disremembered and considered as dead for whom prayer is stated. On the other, the expectation of independence for which Naseem had once left her home, proved to be illusion; the English boy with high promises condensed her to obsequiousness; so to be acknowledged since she belonged to the alien country, she had to make-believe diffidence, always smiling and remain on her knees.

The poem ends with the poet's conviction that freedom in its true sense of the term remains unachievable and impossible for Muslim women. For them, the emancipation of self is restricted only to a small sound which they can deserve to hear with the rattling of a coin restrained in a box. Whether it is within the complicated structure of confinement found in the dominant Muslim countries or the developed countries of the West where the poor Muslim women mistakenly think that the constructive rules get slackened, be it anywhere, their degeneration is evidently prominent. For these women behind Purdah, there is no relief from the scarring strategies and customs of Muslim society.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding discourse demonstrates that Dharker, in her poetry, exhibits herself as a powerful, uninhibited personality who is not only true to herself but also to the society in bringing out the real aspect of her community. In these poems, Dharker appears at her best. The poems exhibit an inexhaustible variety of images that make us ponder over the enigmatic situation in which Muslim women are placed. Their predicament and dilemma are made complicated and painful by severe

patriarchal constraints imposed on women through false conventions and regulations. Each piece reverberates with the message against the torn and terrifying conditions of life here and there and everywhere. Her real motive behind the two poems, "Purdah I and II" instigates the Muslim women to break the barriers of the traditions that choke their lives and feel their individuality rejecting the male coded conventions. She seems to play the role of a social reformer who always maintains an objective distance like a true artist from the victim but raises her voice against the patriarchal oppression and dehumanization through her poetry.

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