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“I” of “I SPEAK FOR THE DEVIL” Imtiaz Darker’s Poem

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Abstract

Imtiaz Dharker has not allowed her orthodox religion to stop her from the expression of her potentialities in her poetry in the form of confessional mode. No wonder, her rebellion has caused a tremble among the so called guardians of orthodox religion and the custodians of common masses. Her concern in her poetry particularly in “I speak for devil” has been the existential pain of humanity as revealed mainly through woman’s relationship with man and the male-dominated society. She writes with frankness and openness unusual in the Indian background but in the view point of West. She exploits the confessional mode in order to discover the images that evoke the joy and frustration of achieved womanhood. The adverse circumstances have rendered her vision tragic and melancholy, her upbringing by Islamic parents, and her marriage though with a Hindu or English man of her own choice in order to remove her parental control. She expresses about these adverse circumstances in her famous poem “I speak for the devil”. This paper will try to find the first person “I” of the collection under same name.

Keywords: Orthodoxy, Religion, Confession, Rebellion, Devil, Exploitation

The confessional mode is usually associated with rendering in the first person. Such a technique imparts a sense of immediacy and genuineness to the sentiments expressed. However, confessional poetry cannot succeed unless it transcends the simple autobiographical mode. To achieve the goal of going beyond what is explicitly stated, the confessional poet employs a language that affects rather than means. Innocuous but abrupt beginnings, use of imagery and symbols that operate simultaneously at more than one level, arrangement of lines in appropriate length to carry nuances of passion and emotion, disregard for syntax and meter and a deliberate adherence to rhythm and movement are some of the devices confessional poets use to overcome the limitations of the first person rendering. In the process the “symbol ‘I’ becomes something other through the medium that absorbs its

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associations; it becomes a magnetic cohesive centre for all the emotional and subjective currents running through the work.” (*M.L. Rosenthal. The New Poets. London,: Oxford University Press, 1967.p.79.*). There are so many poems of Imtiaz Dharker in which she makes the use of first person “I” which have autobiographical elements and through which she makes use of confession in her poetry. Imtiaz Dharker has used the first person in most of her poems, particularly in “I Speak for the devil”.

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry seems to be deal especially with her own life, concrete things, and with their connection to bigger, more abstract things, with what one could call the spiritual. In an interview for BBC World Service she states:

I like to deal with the things of the world, the everyday: the sounds of streets, the sounds of conversations. Now, having said that, I do believe it's the everyday acts that lead to the really sacred things. For example in Seamus Heaney's . . . poem “Digging” he talks of his father “heaving sods / Over his shoulder. [...] / Digging. [...] / The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap / of soggy peat”. And I do think it is that kind of closeness to the smell of real things . . . that can lead to the sublime and the creation of the sublime. (“Spiritual Journeys”)

The book “I Speak for the devil” has the first person “I” in the beginning of title. So it clearly shows that almost all the poems of the book have the confessional element in them directly or indirectly. So through devil within her she enjoys her freedom.

Dharker speaks for the devil in I Speak For The Devil:

She does not feature a Miltonic Lucifer, Faustian double-dealer or sulphurous Beelzebub. But one who lurks in the khassi (toilet in Punjabi); he possesses people.... he can even be confused. Dharker says, ‘beyond the confusion is anger, acidic dribbles of rage as precise as the design of frost on a window.’

(Pinto, 2004: online).

So the devil she enjoys inside her is not the grand ‘Lucifer’ but one who lives with people in their day to day lives, sometimes amusing, disturbing and at other times frightening. Taking the opportunity of the Devil’s voice Dharker uses it as a weapon to expose hypocrisy of both religious leaders and their activities and attacked them in several of her poems. She enjoys her freedom when possessed by the devil. She adopts in it the devil’s voice to speak freely because as a woman she is denied this freedom of speech. According to her, women are respected only when they carry someone else inside their bodies and only in that condition they are listened to and set free. So the title “I speak for the devil” of the book as well as the last but not least important “I Speak For The Devil” admits that when a woman carries a devil within her then and only she is allowed to speak and able to enjoy her freedom. In this section of the book the Devil provides every woman, irrespective of their religion and culture, the opportunity to revenge and express her ideas freely. Not only Islam but every religion

restricts a woman's life. So after attaining a new identity these women, exposes all the havocs and oppressions done to them by using religious values in a frank and authentic way.

The book "I speak for the devil" is divided into three sections. The first section starts with the title of the lost poem of this section "THEY'LL SAY, 'SHE MUST BE FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY'". It is actually an anthem of all the women who called themselves as 'freaks' and who want to make a revolution collectively against system made by so called religious leaders. This section ends with a basic self-satisfied announcement of difference that "I must be from another country" (Dharker: 2001, 31). This section starts with the poem "Honour Killing" and ends with the same poem that of the title of the section "I must be from another country". She starts this section by describing the wretched state of the girl who faced the repercussion of religious convention and suffered because she tried to smash the chains of that relation which was a burden to her. In conventional cultures like Islam, strict sexual codes for women are maintained and if a woman tries to tread out by choosing her own partner, or seeking divorce from an cruel partner, she is believed to bring dishonour to her family and in order to control her, she is mutilated or finished by her family on the name of 'honour killing' to retain their repute, disfigured by rebellious woman. As Dharker starts this section with this quote: In Lahore, in the last year of the 20th century, a woman was shot by her family in her lawyer's office. Her crime was that she had asked for a divorce. The whole Pakistan senate refused to condemn the act. They called it an 'Honour Killing.' (Dharker, 2001, 3). The second section of the book is "The Broken Umbrella" which presents the lives of women and how their feelings and emotions become ghostly from their bodies. This section starts with the poem "The Umbrella" and ends with "*Yellow today*". The third and last section, states with the title of the book "I SPEAK FOR THE DEVIL". This section present a woman's body as a province haunted by herself or by somebody else like a child or a devil. According to her, women are respected only when they carry someone else inside their bodies and only in that condition they are listened to and set free. This section starts with the poem "*The Djinn in Auntie*", and ends with the last poem not only of this section but of the whole book – "*Exorcism*". There is no poem under the name of specific poem under the title "*I SPEAK FOR THE DEVIL*", actually it represents the whole section. The first person "*I*" is almost omnipresent in all the poems of this section of poems. Also the "devil" is also present in almost all the poems directly or indirectly. The "*devil*" is mentioned in the title of so many poems such as: "The dijinn in Auntie", "The devil's day", "In bed with the devil" "The devil to the poet", "Dealing with the devil", "The devil to god", "The devil's advice" and "The devil's valentine". Thematically, this book is concerned with gender issues, the spaces women are permitted to dwell in diverse societies and their struggle to break free from limiting gender roles. These themes are very clear in this section of the poem, which "traces a journey, starting with a striptease where the claims of nationality, religion and gender are cast

off, to allow an exploration of new territories, the spaces between countries, cultures and religions” (Astley 57).

Poet and critic Arundhati Subramaniam describes “I speak for the devil” as “[a]n iconoclastic in-your-face exultation – an unabashed celebration of a self that strips off layers of superfluous identity with grace and abandon, only to discover that it has not diminished, but has grown larger, more generous, more inclusive” and speaks of “Dharker’s unabashed embrace of unsettlement as settlement.” She is certainly correct in her assessment if only the poems of the collection are considered. However, in connection with the drawings, the “celebration” seems much less celebratory and hardly “unabashed.” The following analysis of the first two sequences of “*I speak for the devil*” will therefore attempt a transmedial analysis of Dharker’s art to show that it does not offer black-and-white decisions or answers but that its only colours are shades of grey.

Dharker reflects herself:

If the starting point of *Purdah And Other Poems* was life behind the veil, the starting point of the new book, *I Speak For The Devil*, is the striptease, about what happens when the self ‘Squeezes past the, the easy cage of bone. (Subramaniam, 2007: Online)

In this section, “I speak for the devil” which is also the title given to book, she takes pleasure in her liberty when obsessed by the devil. She approves in it the devil’s tone to speak without restraint because as a woman she is deprived of this liberty of communication. This section present a woman’s body as a province haunted by herself or by someone else like a child or a devil.

When in the poem “The Djinn in Auntie”, the auntie is obsessed by djinn, it confirms a blessing in disguise for her as after it she opens her mouth and communicates her feelings and emotions frankly. Through the ‘djinn’ or devil, she is truly communicating for herself:

But one night when she went down. . .

That was when the djinn got in. . . .

Next day, / when she opened her mouth

And the other voice began to sing. (Dharker: 2001, 49)

She exposes the insincerity of these false leaders who on the one hand confine women within four walls, in the name of religion and on the other hand enjoy themselves in the company of other women even with non Muslim. She has even quoted “Ayub Khan- Din is drinking wine/ and telling our story/to a woman in a skin-tight skirt / that shows all of her legs. (ibid). However it does not mean that she is refuses her faith completely but only its performances in real life which are organised by so called ‘religious leaders’. Dharker is shocked by the behavior and approach of these religious leaders and goes to the extent of not only abusing them but also exposing them through her poetry by the confessional mode of poetry. In this poem Dharker forecasts that one day women would bring revelation and she expresses it

through confessional mode by a verse of this poem “ And then the women and men came in / to hear her from miles around.” (ibid) She expresses that nobody has ‘imagined’ about such type of revelation. She makes her thought clear in this confessional poem when she says the women will be ‘Set free, at last.’

So in the poem “All of us” many women’s voices like Rehmat Ali’s wife, Raju’s mother, Mala, Naseem, Mary, Anita, Fatima, Sarah and Dhamyanti unite into one as they all are subject to the same servitude - corporeal, mental, social and intellectual, but at the end they challenge to tread out of their limits and confront so called religious culture. According to Simone de Beauvoir:

Much more interesting are the insurgent females who have challenged this unjust society, a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful work. (de Beauvoir, 1984:718). All the women in the poem awoke now. After accepting the tone of devil they are capable to reject all limitations forced on them by false religious preachers and cultural forces and are able to hear each other laugh and cry:

All of us
Rehmat Ali's wife sat down
quietly and said
someone else had opened up
her head.
Raju's mother started laughing
and they had to call the Brahmin in.

- - -
"They can say we're out of control.
They can say we've gone
to the devil.
We are able to hear each other now,
laughing, screaming, singing
with one mouth.

(Dharker: 2001, 52-53)

In the poem “Power” Dhaker clearly makes it clear that she has belief upon god, as she “*went to say hello to god.*” (Dharker: 2001, 54) but she knows that the false preachers of religion thinks themselves as god and wants ‘smile’ from her which she is not willing to do. So it shows that she does not reject god but she rejects the so called preachers. With the devil inside her, sujata in the poem “Power” is competent to take pleasure in her free will as now she is at liberty from cultural and religious connections. Now she is no longer in that inferior situation but is appreciated and conferred with vital issues. So it is the first time that people take care of her. She wants to say that when she expresses the truth people come to ‘look’ and ‘see’ her, because they want to make pilgrimage of her. But she ‘close’ her ‘mouth’ because

she wants 'to keep the freedom in' herself. It means that Dharker wants to activate the other female through her confessional poetry even if she will not give lectures or preach them in open.

Look at me and see
More than clothes....
I close my mouth
to keep the freedom in. (Dharker: 2001, 54)

The Devil gives all women, irrespective of their religion and culture, the chance to take vengeance and convey her thoughts and feelings without restraint. Not only Islam but every religion confines a woman's life. So after achieving a new individuality these women, exposes all the havocs and oppressions done to them by using religious values in an open and genuine way. Dharker wants to make it clear in this confessional poem that she is aware about her dynamic personality. She 'realised' it that 'the devil' was in her body. This poem also clarifies that she was not passed by devil completely as she says "I realised ...the devil ... in me, owning one half / of my heart." So there is no doubt from this poem that she does not reject god completely, there at least 'one half' portion of her 'heart' where devil does not live. But from the other side we know that the heart of the so called religious persons is full of the devil, but they take that hidden from masses. In this poem Dharker make use of "I" for herself as it is known that whatever she speaks through her poetry it goes against the so called preachers of the religion, but she does not hesitate as if devil is in her. Dharker expresses in "The Location":

I realised quite soon
- - -
The devil was in me,
walking in my feet,
Living in my clothes,
owning one half
Of my heart. (Dharker: 2001, 66)

So through devil within her she enjoys her freedom. Dharker speaks for the devil in I Speak For The Devil:

She does not feature a Miltonic Lucifer, Faustian double-dealer or sulphurous Beelzebub. But one who lurks in the khassi (toilet in Punjabi); he possesses people. . . . he can even be confused. Dharker says, 'beyond the confusion is anger, acidic dribbles of rage as precise as the design of frost on a window.'
(Pinto, 2004: online)

So the devil she enjoys inside her is not the grand 'Lucifer' but one who lives with people in their day to day lives, sometimes humorous, alarming and at other times terrifying. Taking

the opportunity of the Devil's voice Dharker uses it as a weapon to expose hypocrisy of both religious leaders and their activities and exposes them through confessional mode in her poems.

In "*Saviours*", Dharker exposes the hypocrisy of those men who have "*a rare genius for revenge*". All the 'unholy' men carry holy books and wear masks of holy men. They call themselves our saviours but actuality they are the cause of all our tragedy and misery of the whole globe. Dharker makes her observation of the society in which she lives clear in this poem with the help of confessional technique. The very first verse of the poem is like a proverb "It's hard to say/ who's on which side." It shows that she wants to say that it is very difficult to understand the nature of the man in the world. The scientists can observe even minute particle but they are not able to understand the nature of the man. Also she exposes the so called 'defenders' of the religion as "All the murderers/ are wearing masks/ with god's face painted on." It shows that the 'murderers' of the innocent people are the so called 'defenders' of the religion who shed crocodile tears publically but does the murder of the so called people privately. In this poem "*Saviours*" the first person is not used directly but indirectly it is present in all the lines of the poem as it is like a speech of the speaker.

Saviours
It's hard to say
who's on which side.
All the murderers are
wearing masks
with god's face painted on.
The defenders
of the faith are
devoutly
contemplating
currency,
the slide of the rupee,
tumbling stock,
the taxi drivers' strike,
and whether
our Saviour will return as
a computer chip.
The price of onions
has gone up: the
men around the
table decide it is
appropriate

to go to war.. (Dharker: 2001, 72)

In “*Guardians*” she mocks religious leaders:

Strange how the guardians

Of our morals. . . .

Slither into juicy things

Where they don’t belong. (Dharker: 2001, 80)

Dharker elevates her tone of voice in opposition to those rigid rules and regulations of the false preachers of religion that have trodden humanity in the so called civilized society. The sanctity and spirituality of God has been vanished. There is no trust and loyalty in man due to the false and illogical teachings of the so called religious preachers.

The poem “*Great Glory*” starts the first person “I”. In this very small poem of four stanzas Dharker has make use of “I” in the beginning, use of “my” four times and use of “mine” five times. So it clearly shows that the first person is Dharker herself. She also shows the double standards of man and his disgraceful behavior. He doesn’t even spare God and uses his name for all his crime.

Greater glory

I don't need temples to glorify my name.

My house is your house,

your house is mine.

My work is in every daily newspaper,

my word on every TV.

God was hijacked long ago,

held hostage in empty churches, desecrated temples,

broken mosques.

Mine is the power and glory. Mine is the audience.

Mine is the advertising.

Mine is the TRP. (Dharker: 2001, 90)

Dharker, “spoke for God even as someone whose beliefs had been eroded” (Pinto, 2004 Online). So in the name of religion and God man creates chaos everywhere, he doesn’t need religious places now to glorify his name but his “work is in every/ daily newspaper.../ and on every T V” (Ibid). This is a sarcastic announcement made by Dharker as now man is no more concerned in doing superior performance for the sake of religion but whatever destruction he creates is broadcast either on TV or in newspapers. Freedom is the main need of women and Dharker seeks it through “This Room” in which she take pleasures in her freedom as her room is breaking out of its limitations and seeking ‘space’, ‘light’, ‘empty air’. Thus she says: This is the time and place/ to be alive. (Dharker: 2001, 78)

In the poem “*Canvas*” Dharker speaks directly towards all women through first person “I”. In order to preserve this freedom, she requests all women that they should take revolution

against these suppressive customs of man-orientated culture which reduces a woman to a simple Skelton. In “*Canvas*”:

I don't want
A face that simpers harmlessly.....
Someday I plan to draw it
Interesting, dangerous,
cruel. (Dharker: 2001, 94)

So it is clear from above that the first person “I” is nobody else than Dharker herself, wants to give the vent to her feelings and emotions in the shape of poem in a confessional mode. She wants to express through her poem that life should be free from restrictive and corrupt instructions of society, faith and government. Through “I speak for the devil” she struggles to discover the position and personality of women in modern difficult world. According to her ‘the final act of faith can only be an act of love.’ (Pinto, 2004 Online.

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