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She is from this Country, Imtiaz Dharker reply through her Poem “They’ll Say, ‘She Must Be From Another Country”

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Abstract:

Imtiaz Dharker, for the first time introduced a strong personal voice in Indian English poetry as no other woman poet had done earlier. Her themes go beyond the traditionally accepted thought modes and embrace vast hidden areas of experience and complexity of feeling. Her Poetry is not merely Indian like others but a passionate reply of the universal experience of her alienated life. Her concern has been the existential pain of humanity as revealed mainly through woman’s relationship with man and the male-dominated society in which she is thought as a stranger. Dharker writes with frankness and openness unusual in the Indian background but in the view point of West. Most Indian poets in English do not have the candour of Imtiaz Dharker in creativity analysing and evaluating their experience. She exploits the confessional mode in order to expose the country that evokes frustration and disappointment for women and wants to discover the country that will bring joy and happiness for them. The adverse circumstances have rendered her vision tragic and melancholy, her upbringing by Islamic parents, and her marriage firstly with a Hindu man after his death with an English man in order to remove her parental control. Her dissatisfaction with her ancestral religion and diasporic life sharpened her consciousness. She decided to air out her grievances through the poetic medium, by the poem “I speak for the devil” because many unpalatable things can be said in this medium without incurring the wrath of powerful persons. The research paper will focus Dharker’s poem “They’ll Say, ‘She Must Be From Another Country”.

Keywords: Alienation, Male-Dominated Society, Confessional Mode, Unpalatable

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”

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.’

In “I Speak for the devil”, Dharker has used some very stimulating titles for her poems and all these poems, apart from exposing the troubles of these women also expose an eager wish for complaint. The poem “Honour Killing” is more about a woman redefining her dilemma of being born with restricted choices, bowed down by the tyranny of the realization of the womb and limitations that come in the form of the ‘purdah’ or the ‘mangalsutra’. It is also regarding a system of demystification that takes place in such strict societies where the female speaker considers signifiers, such as the veil and the ‘mangalsutra’ and the rings to be the metaphor of parochialism and orthodoxy. This poem is full of autobiographical elements and the first person “I” used in this poem is Dharker herself, as she has used this poem as a confessional poem for expressing her feelings. At first, she rejects the ‘purdah’, thus moving out of the realm of Islam; then she takes off her ‘mangalsutra’ and the rings, thus moving out of the realm of Hinduism. The idea is not to abandon a particular faith but to give up all the chains that connect her to the darkest interiors of the house. She is not allowed to have the space to either think or move and speak freely so she suffers from a permanent identity crisis. Thus on the final level the poet decides to shred herself off her last skin. Her belief is that the preachers of any religion who treat in this way with human beings must not have understood their own religion. So she rejects the faith that doesn’t allow her to enjoy her freedom, before rising as an independent new free woman: “Its female speaker describes the process of stripping away layer upon layer of tradition and convention to find out who she really is after she has left all these things behind. She starts by taking off this black coat of a country, in the process rejecting a national belonging which is clearly gendered and Islamic as the black coat alludes to the practice of wearing a chador.” (Lehmann, 2012 Online)

In the poem the speaker compares her faith to an old coat that she can finally remove, after wearing it for a long time, “more out of habit / than design”. She takes it off as if it were her country; gender limitations and national connections are therefore linked to the coat hindering her movements. The repressing side of faith in the poem is a black veil that makes the speaker “faithless / to [herself]”. For the woman in the poem, taking off the veil is therefore identical to getting free of a belief that she believes freezing, even “beggar[ing]”. In spite of what may seem at first sight, “Honour Killing” is not a condemnation of Islam, since the speaker is still able to speak of “my god”, although disapproving how his face has been turned into a devil's face by other people's deformations. What is significant is to comprehend about the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker is that she does not refuse Islam and that she keeps believing in the existence of god, as she makes it clear in this poem by confessional technique, although questioning how ordered religion use it as a “blank canvas”, where people can spread whatever appeals to them in that moment. In this poem the speaker takes off her rings and mangalsutra first, and then her skin and flesh, getting rid of everything related to her body. The woman is now nude, depressed of a face, of her skin, of everything in summary. By the end of the poem, limitations of religion, race and sex no longer exist. In other words, the speaker removes what Arundhati Subramaniam calls “layers of superfluous identity” , and tries to find out what there is beneath. The layers the woman is taking off are stressed by the wide use of anaphora. The woman in the poem must now rely on her “new geography”, yet the reference to finding out what she really is – “past / the easy cage of bone” – is disturbing, because it suggests a freedom that miserably seems to come only together with death. The woman is more helpless, perhaps, when she has refused all her layers of identity, of sex, race and faith but Dharker was able to do so in her practical life as well as in her confessional writing. As fellow-poet Tishani Doshi writes in her review of I speak for the devil, “always [in Dharker's poetry], there's the effort to get at what's underneath; tear away the cloaks, the veils, the skin, the parts that can be stitched on, ripped off, traded, worshipped”¹ In the poem titled “Stitched”, Dharker uses the imagery of ‘stitching’ ‘some foreign stuff’ on the woman’s body. It gives a dreadfully aching illustration where the speaker needs to be ‘mended’ or trained as per the surroundings, the husband and the location which is not good according to the writer. The act of ‘stitching’ into the human body is very unusual from teaching a person to speak different languages. This poem repeats wisdom of marvelous pain as if alluding to an important Biblical descriptions, that of Christ being nailed to the holy cross. The unrelenting sense of being a foreigner, or rather a strange made her think that she looked ‘odd’. But the feminist in her does not lose the support to get out of the controlled circle, to break restrictions and release the self. She uses the word ‘dangerous’ to ring a knell that her dance of freedom might be dangerous for the rest of the family, perhaps for the entire society which expects a composed, dignified

and passive female to be living at home where she is not able to speak but Dharker gives her tongue through her confessional poetry.

In the poem “Not a muslim burial” Dharker makes use of the first person “I”. It is used by her for her own views and ideas and she expresses her inner feeling and which she wishes after her death. The speaker of the poem does not want to be connected to any nation and hopes that instead of a Muslim burial, her body would be burned, and her poetry together with it. The poem maintains with the catchphrase to leave her ashes in a country she has never been to, or on a train. This view of Dharker in this most confessional poem is her autobiographical wish about her future after death. Rather than worrying about her homelessness, Imtiaz Dharker here expresses the desire not to be owned by anyone, or by any nation for that matter. The link she feels between her own religion and her nationality is still very strong, and needs to be cut out. Actually she wants to make search even after her death throughout the world.

The poem in this collection which is the best and the most direct representative of the ‘voice’ known as feminine confession, it is “Tongue”. “Your tongue is fighting me”- is the general complaint that the entire patriarchal system has had been against the group of subalterns called women. This poem is unique for its sarcastic approach with each line highlighted with humours way for expressing inner feelings in a confessional mode. The center of attention without human intervention gets dragged onto the ‘twenty years of trauma’ which is definitely not because of the back tooth alone. The back tooth is only able of producing pain but the cause of the ‘trauma’ lies somewhere else. “Your tongue must learn to keep still”, the idea is to keep the woman bound by the command of a blind, stubborn society where it is the privilege of the males to found themselves as the sovereign and better decision making class. At a certain point the tongue gets the role of an individual speaker who is ‘rebellious’ and afterwards a ‘happy slug’ reconfirming that there is always something that needs to be said; the tongue is the only tool of make complaint for the woman who is always considered to be the ‘other’. Societal norms insist that the female’s “zubaan” (Urdu for tongue) must remain “khamosh” (Urdu for silent) and this idea becomes the portent of feminine confession. In this poem Dharker wants to express that she can’t control her tongue for expressing her inner feelings in the form of confessional poetry.

“Here”, is a poem about powerful displacement plants turn into creepy images of “urgent arms, / hands, fingers, blossoming fingernails”, while “faces burn / their way out of the sides of hills” .“Here” is fraught with images associated with fleeing: “the top comes off my head. / All the light flies out”, and the poem ends with the speaker having the impression that “the colour keeps sliding / off my face”. The recollection of the division of India – an event the poet's home city, Lahore – permeates this short poem, but recollections from the speaker's own personal displacement from a Pakistani home in Britain to her new Indian

family are also present and haunting. So, the poem is full with autobiographical elements about the life and views of Dharker.

“There” is obvious by a sense of lament towards past as ‘there’ was a disordered place in which somebody else was making decisions for you while you (woman) had neither any choice nor voice. So, in order to protect her rights and change her condition, she requires some other face. In this poem Dharker views that woman is so much suppressed in the whole world that it is difficult to awake her from the deep slumber. So, now she wants to awake the woman from her slumber through her immortal confessional poems and “There” is one of them.

In the poem titled “Front door”, the idea of the woman moving out of the door has been likened with that of “crossing over/ to a foreign country” almost to the point of exaggeration. But the small steps taken to walk out of the center of the house to the outside becomes an enormous task for the ‘purdah’ wearing woman. Therefore the “dehleez” (Urdu for doorstep) plays a vital role in becoming that Line of Control which the female must cross in order to free herself. The “ghar”-“bahir” dichotomy is evident in this poem. Actually Dharker is against the principle of Islam that woman should not be allowed to come out of her home in nude and alone. She expresses her disgust about this approach in this confessional poem:

These words would sound offensive to a civilization that considers the “ghar” (home) to be virtuous and untainted and the “bahir” (nation) to be polluted distort and malevolence. The truth remains that the light of information can never reach the interiors of the house, where according to Dharker, women have to speak a diverse language, wear different clothes and follow different customs, all condensed under the umbrella of limitations. So “landing as another person” gives the female prisoner a kind of an adrenaline rush, a kind of pleasure which is desirable. Hence, her shameful insist on exceed limitations becomes a worldwide urge, through this confessional poem, for all those chained women who has desire to extend their wings and fly.

In the poem titled, “They’ll say, ‘She must be from another country,” Dharkers confessional and enthusiastic nature amazes flawlessly. It seems as if the lines deal courageously doing things that the society would never support of. We can imagine the speaker wearing unsuitable clothes, speaking a hasty language, claiming that she is ‘black’ and ‘gay’ and yet celebrating her joys of free will. In this poem Dharker expresses her inner feelings that she does not like to be in the control of the rules and regulations of any country. She views that it is better to belong to no country of the planet earth than to be suppressed under the control of wild rules of them. She likes to live in an imagined country along with all the women of the planet earth where they have not to follow the forced customs made themselves by so called religious leaders for their own benefit.

The poem “Announcing the Departure” Dharker recalls the helplessness of women and how they are subordinated and even separated from their own selves, so there is a vital need to start journey towards self refashioning. “There” is marked by a sense of regret towards past as ‘there’ was a chaotic place in which somebody else was making decisions for the woman as if she is not among the humans. She had neither any choice nor voice for her own life. She is forced to follow the rules and regulations made by their counter partner i.e. man. He mends even the fundamental principles of the religion for his own benefit. So, in order to defend her rights and change her condition, she requires some other face. Dharker wants to inform her about her own status in the society. There is no difference on the basis of sex in the society as well as in any religion but women should come out of self imprisoned life. In “Announcing the Departure” says:

“Announcing the Arrival” is the only poem in this section which makes the men, the center of attention. The poet refers to a new century which would not be of men. The poem is packed with ‘tired businessmen’ who were ‘once thin boys’ who have: “grown to men who struggled/ past a paunch to tie/ their feet into shoes.” The poet presents these men as old and rigid and soon their time will be over and soon they will be eaten up by their own words. In this poem Dharker predicts the future, according to her predication through this confessional poem in the coming time woman will be superior to men. She expresses her thoughts for the next generation and informs the women flock that time will come when they will rule the world as men had ruled in past or is ruling at present. So she wants to give warning to the men about their own framed rules through which they make to suffer their own partner i.e. female for their benefit.

In the poem “The Orders” Dharker expresses her own views about the life in by the tongue of the speaker of the poem in confessional way. As in real life she does not like to work upon the orders of somebody in the same way in this poem she says that she is seen through the eyes of another so her face looks disordered. Her face is needed to be seen correctly which can be only done by a broken mirror.

The next poem “Monsoon Words” thus demonstrates future rights to women. There will be possibility for them to change the actualities of their lives. This is presented through the girl in ‘monsoon words’ who run on a road full of possibilities that were impossible before. The city’s sea-shore once belonged to only the thin boys but now belongs and accommodates the speaker and other women. Thus she looks more hopefully at the present and to the future. Dharker wants to give information in this confessional poem to the women that now at present their life has been changed than that of the past because now they are able to express their views in creative writing through different ways. If they will work hard in this way, the coming future will be better for them as they will over dominate the male due to their creative writing. Dharker does not preach whatever she is not able to do herself, while as whatever she has practiced herself she wants others to do that. As she is one of the leading

writers of not only India but of the whole world, it is possible due to her hard work and so she wants to inform other women for the same through this confessional poem.

The feelings and emotions of Dharker are stronger in the second “Announcing the Arrival...,” which is dedicated to Ayesha (presumably Dharker’s daughter of the same name). The poem passionately rejoices the end of the century that was announced in the first arrival poem. The constant pressure on a new and better century joins the arrival poems with the note at the very start of the group of ‘arrival’ poems of the same theme. She is contented to depart her past that used to limit her as a new and better century is waiting for her. Dharker is hopeful about the future of new generation girls like her daughter, Ayesha, who have a ‘bright’ future at the forefront. She gives confidence to these new generation girls as the power to change the world lies in their hands, so that everything becomes achievable for them but they have to work for it. She knows that the past and present generation of female flock suffer but if they will work they will save the future generation. So, through this poem Dharker is able to give good news for future generation that they will not suffer like them. She makes confessional in this poem specially about Indian people as she mentions ‘dance on the crazy rooftops of Bombay’ but in general to all women of the world. So, she forecasts the changed future for the women in this confessional poem which she dedicates to her daughter Ayesha.

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