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## Voices of dissent in the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker

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### Abstract

Feminism as a movement acquired momentum in the last century. Feminist theorists from all corners of the world have put forward their views and ideologies to analyse and interpret the rights and duties, the laws and regulations which are exclusive to women. They have discussed, debated and deliberated on sundry affairs concerned with a woman, right from domestic drudgery to her involvement in official engagements, from cultural taboos inflicted on her as a girl in childhood to her perils even in old age, from puberty to post-menopause stage in her life. The heat of feminist discourse has hit contemporary Indian women poets writing in English, and therefore they have documented their perspectives through poetry leaving poignant impressions in the readers' minds. This article is an evaluative approach to explore the impact of culture and religion, mostly Islam and partly Hinduism in different aspects of women's lives. Her poems exhibit how the dictates of religious authority and tradition wipe away equality, compassion, and humanity and stifle a woman's life to denigrate her personality to such an extent that she is rendered into self-depreciative non-entity in her own vision.

**Keywords:** Burqua, feminism, gender relations, Islam, patriarchy

### Introduction

It is a well-known fact that segregation of women according to gender norms has remained a centuries' old phenomenon in different parts of the world. Literature, especially, women's writings like *A Vindication of the Rights of the Women* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft or the seminal text *The Second Sex* (1989)<sup>1</sup> by Simone de Beauvoir have discussed matters pertaining to feminine issues, either sometimes with overt exposition or at times with covert subtleness. In Indian sub-continent, there are abundance of texts right from early periods as demonstrated in the writings of Buddhist nuns of sixth century BCE followed by Tamil saint poets and then Varkari sect poets of medieval Maharashtra. Some of the authors are Janabai, Bahinabai, Ladai, Rajai to the contemporary poets and feminist activists like Kamala Bhasin, Suma Chitnis, Kumkum Roy, Urvasi Butalia or Uma Chakravarti and scores of others who have shown how women have been assigned secondary position in society. Their works are permeated with piece of evidence that talk about the subjugation of women in all forms, their subordination to patriarchy through social, economic, ideological dependence on male members of the family. Patriarchy has

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<sup>1</sup>Originally published in 1949.

executed women's subordination on three levels: "the first was ideology; the second was the right to discipline and keep women under control granted to their kinsmen; and the third was the power of the king to discipline and punish them for their errant behaviour" (Chakravarti, 2009, p.73). In the first scheme, women were so conditioned in the idolization of male figures of the family that they colluded in their subjugation. The last two processes of control were forcefully implemented by institutional forces and social power to tame women into patriarchal modes of operation. Over the years there has been the transformation of methods, validating the mechanisms of control and one can notice that "... the emerging picture of a woman's life in India is total subjugation and submission" (Bose, 2000). No wonder social structures have bonded with religion to restrict women from experiencing complete autonomy of their own lives; with the passage of time, the methods of domination have changed both in degrees as well as in manifestations.

Feminist criticism, as we know, chiefly focuses on different issues from the perspective of women, it tries to investigate the position of women in a society dominated by patriarchal conventions. Today, feminist criticism employs several strategies to question the stereotyped binary model of male/female polarities. Feminists, all over the world have depended upon new structures to identify the gendered and sexual politics. As such feminist theorists, have examined female identities from the point of view of history, culture, body, film, psychoanalysis, literature, language, philosophy, myth, and religion as well. Judith Butler (1990), the eminent feminist critic, in *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, discusses how "compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism are understood as regimes of power /discourse with often divergent ways of answering central questions of gender discourse" (p.xxx). She further refers to other theoretical discussions like structuralism, psychoanalytic and feminist accounts of incest taboos that work as mechanisms to establish gender identities within the framework of heterosexuality. The text further probes into the politically constructed idea of body and elaborates on the "performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame" (Butler 1990, p. xxxi). Estella B. Freedman in her book *Feminism, Sexuality and Politics* (2006) documents through a number of essays the historical enterprise and political practices inherent in feminism. Her essays take up the questions related to homosexuality, the

concept of race, class in lesbianism, identity and historical construction of sexuality and other such dominant perspectives of women's lives that are often ignored. In another book named *At the Heart of Freedom, Feminism, Sex and Equality* (1998), the famous scholar Drucilla Cornell executes her ideas of how to reconcile between sexual freedom and social equality. She invokes core issues related to women; like their sexuality, freedom, and equality. She is of the opinion that women should try to free themselves from the state imposed sexual choices which delimit different aspects of their lives. Cornell justifies in favour of social equality that will enable individuals to free themselves from rigid gender identity reinforced by state-imposed sexual choices. This is because by realising this kind of freedom women will ultimately free themselves from the nagging consciousness of the primary caretakers of their families forced and manipulated by social institutions and enjoy liberty in the true sense of the term (Cornell, 1998). Thus, a wide-ranging perspective is employed to gauge the gendered identity by feminist critics. Consequently, in this connection, the discourse of gender construction that dwells on the dualism of male/female binary in the context of culture and religion has also become vital. The female poets of English Indian literature in post-1980s era emerged as new women poets because they relate themselves to the major feminist issues of the contemporary period. These poets starkly differ from their predecessors in their tendency and perspectives towards patriarchal domain. They manifest changed opinions towards feminist ideology, and moving from domestic preoccupations they incorporate broader concepts of culture, society, history, and ethnicity. Also, such subtle nuances like the complexities evolved in a man-woman relationship or the experience of single life in a metro or even in abroad find a place in their poetry. These concerns, though typically appropriate to human situation, affect women's lives more poignantly; and we find the Indian women poets like Tara Patel, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, Eunice de Souza, Milanie Silgado and many others reflect upon them. The present paper attempts to evaluate the poetic credo of Imtiaz Dharker, the distinguished contemporary poet of English Indian literature. The focus is to evince the ideology of gender and sexuality at work, either blatantly or with subtlety, due to religious and cultural constructs as Dharker has illustrated in her poetry. A genuine effort to read her poetry from feminist standpoint help us to make an assessment of the strategies which she employs to create an identity for women selves articulated as a standard voice so as to recognize their expectations in male-dominated space.

Imtiaz Dharker is one of the luminaries in the contemporary poetic firmament of English Indian poetry. Born in a Muslim family in Lahore, now in Pakistan, in 1954 she spent her childhood in Glasgow, Scotland where her father migrated to at her very early age. She married an Indian Hindu with whom she came to Mumbai, India and began making documentary films besides writing poetry. Later she married Simon Powell, the founder of Poetry Live and shifted to London. Dharker's multi-cultural experience provided her the opportunity to know about customs and cultural conventions that women are subjected to, both in East and West. Consequently, her poetry exhibits the marked influence of three cultures that of England, Pakistan and India. With a profound insightful understanding, she reflects on the predicament of the human situation about these three cultures with obvious emphasis on the precarious position of women in particular. Dharker is the poet who with an undaunted zest rebels against patriarchal oppressions that operate in various social trajectories. Her poetic volumes are eloquent with a discourse which can be studied as an indictment of socio-cultural and religious convictions that have robbed women of their freedom, dignity, self-assertion and have left them as physical and mental wrecks at the mercy of men. A veritable reading of her poetry makes it clear to a perceptible eye that the feminist concerns of Dharker make her distinctly articulate the agony and anguish, pity and sympathy for those poor, wretched women who become prey at the hands of the custodians of culture, and religious orthodoxy.

Dharker's cultural affiliation with Islam on account of being born in a Muslim family associates her with different cultural conducts that typify the Muslim society in general. The ambience at her home in Glasgow if not repressive in the strict sense of the term was not flexible either from a western point of view<sup>2</sup>. Since childhood Dharker has been witness to various social codes and regulations as seen at home; and that these conventions condense to numerous strictures conducted through constricting patriarchal impositions prevalent in Muslim society everywhere. She emphatically registers her protests and disapproval in a strong rebellious voice against patriarchy which gradually engulfs social, personal as well as the emotional life of a woman and thereby chokes all possibilities of her flowering of self as the woman. Supplemented with black and white sketches by the author herself, the poems reveal the zone of assault where woman soul

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<sup>2</sup>An interview with Imtiaz Dharker broadcasted in BBC Radio 4 in the programme named Desert Island Disc.

bleeds due to incessant conflict within the patriarchal hegemonic regime. Her first poetic volume ‘*Purdah*’ (1989) projects some major cultural values of Islam religion, where conventional rigidity is exposed with suffocating consequences:

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. (Dharker, 1997, p.14).

The use of *purdah* or *hijab* is one of the essential practices in Islam whereby a Muslim woman is supposed to wear a veil covering her entire body before any men but her close family members. In a way, one can identify *purdah* with an ideological concept of confinement of which the *burqua* or the veil is the physical manifestation.

The veil’s original intent was to promote sexual purity, but it has historically constrained Muslim women’s freedom of movement and often secluded them. Later Muslim clerics argued that seclusion guarded women from harsh worldly affairs but it legitimized male agency and female passivity. Muslim girls are thus often constrained from attending schools even those in mosques. (Raman, 2009, p 8-9).

Thus, it becomes evident that the idea of *purdah* has been appropriated over time to regiment woman into limited roles. The confinement of women through such ideological notion is legitimized in patriarchal setup because it acts as a means to keep her within confines. Besides, patriarchy uses the theological argument that women are stigmatized in religion as evil who has engineered the Fall of Man from the grace of God. That, the woman (Eve) is responsible for the initial misfortune of the first man (Adam) through wicked manipulation of Satan is inscribed in the religious texts also. Eve defied God’s command and tasted the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In this act of defiance, she made Adam her partner and so when God asked about the disobedience, Adam replied, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate” (The Gideons International, Genesis 12: 3). Thereafter, God cursed both woman and man. To the woman, he said, “I will greatly multiply your sorrow . . . your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 12: 16). God then said to Adam that, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, . . . cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life” (Genesis 12: 17). Thus, the woman caused misery not only for herself, but she is considered as the source of all inexorable pains that befall man. Hence, to be on the safer side, in order to prevent the arousal of baser instincts in

man, which may bring endless sufferings in him, the woman should be put within the black robe of purdah. This viewpoint does not consider women's perspective in any way. It absolutely negates her sensitivity and forcefully circumscribes her within a black veil where her body feels much like the fall of earth on coffins of dead bodies. Just as a corpse confined within a limited space of coffin feels nothing, the woman who uses purdah feels the same benumbed sensation of death, for it often leads to the annihilation of her identity. As a consequence, this leads to death like awareness akin to the fall of loose earth upon touching a dead body. With this telling imagery, Dharker communicates her resentment for the custom of wearing *burqua* which denies the woman her due share of life, resulting in the extermination of her personality. She is the 'other', whose status is no better than a corpse. Her wishes and wants are to be monitored by some invisible social codes with stifling consequences; that is:

...to bind  
their brightness tightly round,  
whatever they might wear,  
in the purdah of their mind. (Dharker, 1997, p.18).

Yazdi (2010) in a short piece of writing called '*Studying Islam*' (2010) notes that:

Islam commands the woman to cover herself from head to toe once she leaves her house and outside the family environment. . . This is so to prevent men other than her husband, or close relatives with whom marriage is prohibited, such as brothers, uncles and so on from seeing her physique. The woman outside the family environment must also not use make-up so as to attract the men and engage in coquetry in any way. (Yazdi, 2010, p.18).

This statement can be read in association with the above poetic extract to understand how Dharker has tried to underline the debilitating custom of purdah for a woman which negates to acknowledge her as a human being. In a sense, she is nothing save an object of lust and therefore needed to be veiled from prying eyes. To face the outer world, she has to render herself into a bundle of the black robe that is the *burqua* that no one would care to notice. Moreover, as the above extract says, she should not use any cosmetic product to beautify herself lest she should tempt men to some ignoble act. One fails to derive any logic between the use of make-up and being coquetry; then if anybody remains under the impression that just by wearing some kind of make-up one can attract men then one is likely to wonder about what beauty product men use to entice women in their false world of love and security:

People she has known

stand up, sit down as they have always done.  
 But they make different angles  
 in the light, their eyes aslant,  
 a little sly. (Dharker, 1997, p. 18).

Here readers are likely to encounter a pertinent question that whether all kinds of restrictive behavioural patterns be applicable on women only for the smooth functioning of society.

Dharker points to the distressing plight of women by pointing how patriarchal dictums dictate religion for its own purpose. She refers to conventions sanctioned in the Muslim society where patriarchy and religion work in cognizance to determine certain cultural ethics. In her poem, '*Purdah II*' (1997) Dharker narrates the unfortunate tale of two women who undergo the atrocities of patriarchal codes. A particular woman named Saleema marries within her community even though she loved an English man. The marriage hints to the practice of *mehar*; the money assured to Muslim girl against divorce from husband. Dharker is of the notion that this convention demeans a woman to mere commodity – “they have all been sold and bought, the girls I knew” (Dharker, 1997). *Mehar* is an obligatory condition of marriage in Muslim society whereby both the parties mutually agree to pay some amount either in cash or in kind by the groom to his bride. The practice has practical benefit of protecting women in case of emergencies by providing some stability, but often it turns out to be otherwise. The poet points to the seamy side of this practice by recounting that women have no say in their lives; they turn as silent spectators who only nod to the whims of men. What the poet is objecting to in this given extract is the commoditization of women at the hands of men. Soon Saleema turns into a child-producing machine with annual results as her religion prohibits adoption of birth-control measures. In desperation, she moves out and marries another man but to no avail.

Another character of Dharker's narration is Naseem, her fate is no better than that of Saleema. She marries an English man and suffers agonizing consequences of transgressions. The entire family bore the burden of her shameless act of dishonouring the family and “... you are remembered / among the dead” (p.21). No less exorable is her predicament with the English boy who made her dance to his tunes; always she is “trying to smile and be accepted” (p. 21). Eunice de Souza, the eminent poet in English Indian literature, has viewed rightly about this poem. She writes that, “Some of the women do ‘break cover’, as the speaker advises, and find ‘another



man', or an 'English boy/ who was going to set you free' (p.48). But all attempts at escape end with the women on their knees" (De Souza,1997).

The domestic subjugation of woman with an ordinary middle-class background is further reinforced in the poem '*Another Woman*' (Dharker, 1997). The woman here is tied down by certain impositions and has to go by the wishes of her in-laws. This dwarfs her personality; and no-matter whatever strain she bears for the family, harsh criticism and curses come to her as a reward. She is allotted a small space on the floor of the kitchen. Marriage robs her of the voice to protest against the abuses of in-laws because "Nothing gave her the right to speak" (p.46). The mother-in-law too hurls out her abuses to the poor woman; even her family members become victim to the old woman's verbal abuse. It is ironic that women coerce with the patriarchal mechanisms to oppress women within their own family. Uma Chakravarti poses this question in her book '*Gendering Caste*' (2009) by asking, "Why do women become complicit in systems which subordinate them?"(p.144).She puts forward her views which appear as the probable answer for such apparently bizarre behaviour; women derive certain access to economic resources and social power through their relationship to the men folk. These benefits are available to them only if they conform to patriarchal codes. Thus, compliance brings them gains, power, and autonomy just in trifling measures whereas deviance expels them from every material resource of the family. Ironically the compliance of women is represented in such fashion as to colour it in the "neutral notion of upholding tradition or the specific cultures of families or communities, then moving onwards to the Hindu nation whose cultural repository somehow resides specifically on women." (Chakravarti, 2009, p.144). In this way, patriarchal social system allure women with such subtlety that women, sometimes comply to the oppression of patriarchal structure either consciously or unconsciously. Such is the conditioning of women in the modes of patriarchal regimental measures that they become least hesitant in persecuting and tormenting those who belong to their fold only. The mother-in-law being a woman herself flings abuses to the woman protagonist apparently to flatter the male ego of her family members. As if this is not enough, the husband, all of a sudden, brings the second woman in the house and heaps further misery on her. Pathetic it may appear that, it is she who becomes another woman "Another torch, blazing in the dark" (Dharker, 1997, p.47), she comes to the secondary position. In this poem, Dharker exposes the callousness that amounts to savagery perpetrated upon women folk by her

own people. It is not only in the outer world that she is unsafe and insecure, but even within her home she is open to heinous crimes. The husband's house which ought to be her own house turns out to be a tortuous territory where there is no respite; instead every household member participates to demean her identity as female self.

The vulnerable position of women put them in the clutches of fear. Patriarchy imposes so many customs upon them that they are always under the vigilance of society:

Mouths must be watched, especially  
if you're a woman. A smile  
should be stifled with the sari-end.  
No one must see your serenity cracked,  
even with delight. (p. 40).

All these restrictions heavily weigh upon a woman's consciousness which make her forget all about her expectations from life. On the contrary, what sums up her position is "Fear, you tell me, is a woman's place" (p. 41).

Imtiaz Dharker articulates her annoyance for the practice of exclusion of women from taking part in religious ceremonies and prayers in yet another poem 'Grace'. A woman's biology comes in her way to pray "God the compassionate, the Merciful" in mosque. The moulvi, that is the religious preacher spits out his contempt when he sees a woman coming by spelling out:

A woman comes  
with her eyes concealed.  
She trails the month behind her.  
We are defiled. (p. 22).

Here, Dharker refers to the process of menstruation and it is argued that "the Merciful, / created man from clots of blood" (p. 22). The woman had expected to find some peace in the *masjid*, (the mosque) but instead she receives disgust from the man to whom she looked for wisdom. Ironically, she is disgraced in a place where she hoped for God's grace. The poem is a scathing criticism of hypocrisy that engulfs religious customs associated with Islamic community to which the poet belongs. Such a derogatory taboo which has percolated into cultural code is attached with women's sexuality. It is observed not only among the Muslims but is quite prevalent in Hindu custom as well. For instance, in a book named *The Life of Hinduism* (2006), edited by John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan, an important observation has been made. A woman undergoing her monthly period is supposed to follow these restrictive practices:

She should sit apart from others and not go to religious or social events, because a menstruating woman is considered “dirty” until she takes a full bath five days after the start of her period. After her bath, she can again enter the kitchen, draw water, and resume normal interaction with others. Muslim women do not follow all these restrictions, but they refrain from praying or touching the holy Koran. (Hawley & Narayanan, 2006, p.63).

Dharker’s consciously feminist ideology that is, her ideas pertaining to the concept of feminism is permeated in her poignant imageries which she uses to reveal the expectations of women selves in her poetry. ‘*Signals*’ is a poem that tells about a mother’s anguish who asks “Was it an accident that I made you?” (Dharker, p.81). Her discontent bursts out when she sees that it takes no effort for her son to forget her, to throw her away and even to “sharpen the blades, / cut me out of your heart” (p.81). But never for once he could realize “... what pain it takes /to shake existence out of the million leaves/of creation (p.81). The pangs of labour may be severe for the mother; the grown-up son, however, is least concerned about her and being ungrateful to his mother, the son negates her existence in his life. The poet’s feminist attitude is prominently revealed in yet another poem named ‘*Cloth*’ where she reflects on the silencing of women by the dominance of patriarchal system.

Gag the ones who try to speak.  
Take their hands and bind them up.  
They are nothing, voiceless, weak. (p.152)

Women are rendered as defenceless, they are exposed to all kinds of precarious situations and therefore it is easy to adopt crude and brutal measures to silence their voice: “Burn their flesh. Break the limbs. / Crumple them between your hands” (p.152). These are all that men can do to women, again that too with ease and liberty because they hold the baton of power dynamics and use that to their convenience. In their arrogance to exert influence and strength upon the so-called ‘other’ they forget that “through the shroud, / their mouths will sprout / and shout aloud” (p.152). In an air of hope the poet concludes her poem with an assertion that the scales may turn otherwise. The voices so long hushed up and muffled will make them loudly audible and the dominant voices then begin to scream “for freedom, / for a choice” (p.153). When periphery comes to the centre, the authoritative influence which has been occupying the centre-stage automatically shifts to the margin. Thus, the turn of events will be such that the superior voice of patriarchy “will be their chosen voice” (p.153) then.

### **Dharker's other collection**

Dharker is never hesitant to register her protest against the ill-treatment of women; be in personal sphere or even in the greater social contexts where traditions and rituals are forcibly thrust upon women. Her poetic volume *'I Speak for the Devil'* (2003) further enhances her poetic creed and the book attains the stature of feminist manifesto where the poet deals with multiple aspects that concern women in the contemporary world. The volume opens with a dedication to all those “who stood up/ and spoke out . . . who have nothing left / to be afraid of”. The dedication also includes those women who have not yet begun their struggles against the constraints or restrictions imposed upon them. Most important, this short dedicatory poem ends with a hope, to encompass all the women of the world whether they have the courage to voice their protests or not but have felt the oppression of patriarchy.

The horrendous impact of purdah continues to be the subject of poet's scathing criticism in the poem *'Honour Killing'* (Dharker, 2001) the first poem of this volume. The title is suggestive; honour in the Indian subcontinent, paradoxically enough, is linked with women be it for a Hindu woman or a Muslim. It is, as if, the women are solely responsible to maintain and uphold the families' honour which is otherwise an extremely delicate thing to be preserved. However, there is hardly any mention of any regulatory practices to be followed by men to preserve the family honour. The present poem portrays the occasion of the murder of a woman in Lahore, a city in Pakistan by her family who sought for divorce from her husband. This very incident proves how women are rendered into puppets whose actions are determined by rules formulated by moral guardians of society. A mere seeking of separation can lead to loss of the woman's life because divorce would bring disgrace to the family. To top it all it is not the in-laws to commit this heinous crime but the woman's own family. By using powerful imagery in the poem, the poet further carries forward the context of and elaborates on how a single robe of “black coat” takes its toll upon the personality of a woman to demean her psychology. It demolishes her self-esteem and renders her individuality into non-entity transforming her into a mass of blackness.

In the poem, the poetic persona deliberately disowns “the black coat” that is the *burqua*, which is not just a piece of cloth but signifies the culture, and custom pertaining to Islam. Conventions have imposed that robe on her and she wears it more out of habit and compulsion than anything else, she “wore more out of habit / than design” (Dharker, 2003, p. 5). This black veil has taken

away her self-confidence and muted her voice. However, it is not only customs, be social or religious, that restrict the freedom of women but relationship also in the form of marriage stifles her to a great extent. The poem moves from representing a singular religious faith of Islam to include the cultural custom of Hindu belief. She exclaims:

The mangalsutra and the rings  
rattling in a tin cup of needs  
that beggared me. (p.5).

The woman persona in the poem wants to do away with this false identity that has been imposed upon her, she wants to take off the purdah which has implanted negative attitudes within her, rendered her voiceless and faithless. All these trinkets associated with femininity like the black veil, mangalsutra and even the rings serve as tools to “feed dictator dreams”. They sap the vitality and humanity in women as the fair sexes are conditioned to imbibe these small tropes to such an extent that these objects become more real while the individual who uses them in reality fades away in oblivion. In the above quotation, it is inevitable that the butt of criticism is not restricted to the Muslim customs only but is extended to the traditional practices of other religion that is Hinduism. The married Hindu woman is supposed to wear mangalsutra, a thin necklace made of gold and black beads, and ring as mark of her marriage. The women who strictly adhere to such norms are considered cultured, docile, and family-oriented while no such rules are laid down for Hindu married males. Any woman who does not conform to these traditional practices is subjected to severe criticism on the ground that her unruliness would definitely entail untold misfortune on the family more specifically on the husband. No wonder, weary of such suffocating orthodoxy the persona now wishes to put aside her purdah, her mangalsutra and her ring which has become more of her skin either because of habitual use since long or of regressive measures imposed on her. Now she hopes to discover her individuality as self. She wants to see for herself the consequences after she takes hold of her own life:

what I am out here,  
making, crafting,  
plotting  
at my new geography. (Dharker, 2003, p. 5).

In this poem, the purdah acts as the symbol of cultural convention, restriction and regulation which are imposed on women only while men are positioned beyond any of these strictures. Through this poem, the poet points out the devastating impact of these atrocious convictions on

women who gradually lose their personality and become mere pawns at the hands of their men folk who again use them to perpetuate their self-interests.

The sustained suffering and subjugation caused by cultural strictures and religious injunctions sometimes lead to the breaking of voices of dissent. No wonder cracks develop in the otherwise serene façade through which fissures out modes of resistance in a way to assert individual self. The poem '*All of Us*' (Dharker, 2001) frames this strain of feminist idea. The title of this poem is quite suggestive, it hints to those women who have been attributed the traits of abnormality by patriarchal principles. It is a known fact that in a male dominated world the societal criteria are laid down according to male definitions. As a result, the yardstick which is followed to value the different aspects of rights or wrongs is essentially patriarchal where any other standard of behaviour is considered as anomalous. The society is oriented towards certain norms of behavioural patterns and cultural forms; these gradually coalesce into regulations which, over time, attain the status of touchstone to gauge the value system of society. Viewed from this angle the poem '*All of Us*' presents a cameo of unusual conduct among people, ironically all women:

Ayub Khan's auntie went to the khassi,  
met her djinn,  
and started to speak in a foreign tongue.  
Mala killed a chicken and cooked it  
with the all the feathers on. (Dharker, 2003, p. 52).

Now, how far their way of doing things are strange or eccentric according to male standard, is a different question altogether. But the point which holds the readers at awe is that:

This is a narrow road,  
but we are on it,  
more of us every day,  
shouting out loud to one another  
as if we'd met before, somewhere  
on the way. (Dharker, 2003, p. 53).

There is a certain invisible string which binds all these distressed women together. No matter, they are stigmatized as weird, "they can say we're out of control". These women are able to free themselves from the authoritative fetters of patriarchy and can now be, "...able to hear each

other/...laughing, screaming, / singing/ with one mouth”. The poet celebrates their sense of liberty even in the face of being labelled as queer by conventional standard.

The poem ‘*Chilli-hot*’ (Dharker, 2001) presents a different aspect of male oppression though in a subtle way. The poem is divided into four parts; the first part depicts the scene of lovers making love, but this picture changes abruptly in the second part where this love is marked by brutality and severity of harshness:

I’m about to love you  
like the pestle pounding  
green chillies  
into chutneyed pain. (Dharker, 2003, p.61).

“Pain” is the keyword in this entire love affair which is rather stifling, and when the actual act of the love-making is performed, the beloved suffers a change of individual self, whether she is ready to accept this transformation of her personality or not, matters least to her partner.

In another poem named ‘*A short detour from dying*’ (2001), Dharker jolts the readers out of their complacency. The opening of the poem is dramatic:

Smash the mirror.  
Smash the face that lives in there.  
Watch it fly  
out of uncertainty to madness,  
catch the splinters in your eye. (Dharker, 2003, p.93).

From the smug world of compromise, women are often forced to lead a double life where they act duplicitous to their real selves and always remain worried in their concerns to make the adjustment only to keep others happy. This typical temperament in the women becomes their habit and gradually which they believe to be their lot. The poet incites to break this false façade which society and culture forcefully inflict upon women. She urges these self-imprisoned women to take the initiative of taking control of their own lives so that they can fulfill their wishes. Most of the women possess false image, often unwillingly, they are compelled to bear the image of “angel in the house” whereby they make a show of everything fine and proper while their situation may be entirely worse. The poet entreats these women to say adieu to these notions of deceitful image:

You once had an idea  
of yourself

kiss it goodbye. (Dharker, 2003, p.93).

Through this poem, the poet articulates the idea that women should break free from their own concept of womanhood which is largely a cultural construct and live life according to their own conditions which can only release their individuality.

The concept of modifying the self-image of women enforced upon them is further carried on in the poem '*Canvas*' (2001). The poem portrays the struggle of the poetic persona to hide her real self beneath a false makeover:

Everyday, I try to redraw my face.  
I take a brush and crayons,  
pens and pencils, paints and powdered  
colours, and paint a face.  
I paint it over the face I already have,  
like a canvas I'd like to erase. (Dharker, 2003, p. 94).

The protagonist goes on to relate that it is not that she does not like her real face which God gave her, "but it looks unhappy,/ the mouth turns down". The smiling face is all deception; to cover her agony, pain of maintaining a false veneer just to cater to the need of society and other cultural bindings. She does not want to put on this mask which only "simpers harmlessly/like this", instead she wants to turn the face dangerously cruel. The poem points out that the woman tired of simulations which she is forced to perform against herself now wants to assert her true identity, even though it amounts to prove her as a cruel or alarming person by common standards of law and regulation that are promulgated by patriarchal hegemony. Here, the poet passes the message that a woman should not abandon her feminine self to put on some artificial guise which only leads to her self-depreciation and adds to her misery.

## **Conclusion**

Dharker, being a poet, artist and documentary film-maker brings mixed heritage and itinerant lifestyle at the heart of her writing. Yet for all the seriousness of her themes, Dharker is a truly global poet, whose work speaks plainly and with great emotional intelligence to anyone who has ever felt adrift in the increasingly complex, multicultural and shrinking world we inhabit.

However, it is the feminist perspective with a compelling note that the poet violently adopts to illustrate that society and religion delimit the life of a woman to a great extent. A woman is regimented within a conceptualized framework and therefore is bound to create her identity or



fulfill her expectations according to the norms of patriarchy. Dharker's resentment is pointed and vibrant, she is distinctly a poet of strong feminist convictions where sometimes she even sounds political to a certain respect. In her poems, she elaborates upon the various aspects of patriarchal power, the oppressive measures adopted by male-oriented authoritative hierarchies through religion and culture which are instrumental to represent woman as a commodity or even non-entity that devoid her of any right to act as human being. A woman in her poems is fettered in chains framed by custom, religion, ethnic traditions and even a false sense of superior religious values which are nonetheless beguiling. Bruce King, the eminent critic in the field of English Indian literature, has rightly pointed out that "Dharker is a powerful poet who uses her own situation in society, whether in England or India, to create poetry which examines large social problems" (King, 2001, p.325).

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