



Reconnoitering Postcolonial *Literature*

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From Suffering to Salvage: A Study of Selected Poems of Imtiaz Dharker

Arundhati Barde

Imtiaz Dharker is recognised as an international figure in the field of world literature. Recipient of Queen's Medal for poetry in 2014, she is recognised as one of Britain's the most influential contemporary poet. Her cultural experience spans three countries: born in Lahore, Pakistan, grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, spent many years in India and now divides time between India and Scotland. She is one of the rare geniuses who have influenced two traditions of literature: Indian English writing and contemporary British poetry. Casting off illusionary or shadow boundaries and coming to terms with one's true self appears a central motive of her poetry. In her quest to understand 'Who am I?' she gradually transgresses her narrow considerations of her own self mainly religion, gender, nation, etc., and comes to terms with ultimate reality of human existence. The chapter focuses on the selected poems of Dharker where her quest of identity as a migrant person is expressed. Projection of diasporas life in all its complexity is one of the central concerns of Dharker's poetry. Her poems exhibit a certain trajectory which migrant person does follow. Dharker projects diasporic life in all its complexity. However, orchestration of these symphonies of Migrant life ends on a melodious note. Earlier troublesome life of a migrant turns out with a celebration of life at the intersections. Her vision gets broadened and become more inclusive.

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry from her first volume 'Purdah and other Poems' to the fourth one 'Leaving Fingerprints' exhibits an inner dialectics. Quest for identity is basic to any thinking individual and with poet this quest is more intense. Casting off illusionary or shadow boundaries and coming to terms with one's true self appears a central motive of her poetry.

Dharker's third collection *I Speak for the Devil* paradoxically represents both an extension of and a departure from her earlier work. The abiding concerns are still very much in evidence: home, freedom, journeys, geographical and cultural displacement, communal conflict, and gender politics. But there is also something unmistakably new. There is 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, and more inclusive.

The fevered search for sanctuary ("Tell me, / how can I come home?"—) of *Purdah* is replaced by a realisation that anchor is sometimes to be found in the journey rather than the destination. The poet's voice locates home between countries, "between borders", proudly flaunting her allegiance to 'another country', uncircumscribed by race, nationality or gender. She opens her front door and goes out to meet the world on her own terms, "speeding to a different time zone, heading into altered weather, landing as another person." One believes this voice, it's because its 'bigness' is never grandiose; it is arrived at through a process of concerted exfoliation. The emergent self is protean, shifting, cunning, humorous, unencumbered, sometimes angry, but equally capable of accepting its own absurdity and inconsequentiality.

Dharker has found many alternative paradigms to the painful life of an immigrant. Dharker expresses not only home and away dichotomy but expresses multifaceted negotiations associated with migrant life especially about woman's life. Her poetic mediations made her poetry replete with many kinds of dialectics. Some of them are dialectics of belonging and unbelonging, aversion and desire, captivity and freedom, opaqueness and transparency. In the process, migrant selves constantly fashions and refashions themselves.

Dislocation is the first feeling that haunts diasporic community. Physical and cultural displacements produce several strains on

one's sense of self. Her poetry displays hidden discontents and contradictions. Dharker's poetry is openly autobiographical. Being a part of three cultures she feels she has lost her true self and looks very odd in a foreign country like a cloth which is patched with different fabrics. Her poetic persona is afraid that she is looking like garbage. She underscores her fragmented and fractured self in the poem 'Stiched'.

But they used some foreign stuff
That pointed out the parts
Where I'd been mended.
And so my mouth spoke Punjabi

While my brain heard Scots.

In a garbage bag, I looked so odd (2001, 11).

One of her speakers feels a terrible loss of her moral and spiritual being. In that anxiety, she is doubtful about her physical existence itself. She confirms her existence in panes of glass, in shop-windows and in bits of chrome on cars.

I know what it is:

Not vanity.

It's just to reassure yourself

You are still in place.

Still here.

The sense of voicelessness, the fear of losing one's identity is the obvious corollary of all the otherising processes to which the migrant self is subjected. She has expressed it with number of images and symbols.

the woman getting on a plane.

This is how it will happen

A bird that has stopped singing

On a still road. This is how it will sound

You wrapped my mouth in plastic

And told me to breath in fresh air.

this is how it will feel (2006, 21).

Alienation and excommunication create a communication gap which leads to loneliness. The speaker feels 'lonely in crowd' which causes a terrible suffering to immigrant. The city is full of sounds but no communication takes place; only harsh sounds without any melodious note in it.

The city I am in has lost
Its volume control.
Every person in the place
Is tuned to the maximum.

A phone shrills, a TV switches on.
Everywhere, the sound of sirens, drills.
Cars screech, horns blare.
Where
Are you?
Why have you stopped singing? (2006, 36)

The treatment given to the foreigner terribly affects the psyche of a person. It is compared to a prisoner suffering physical punishment on one's body. Though in her case, she is not abused physically but she suffers the marks of unseen, unnoticeable punishment.

I was not abused.

that these welts have
Risen on my back,
appeared on throat and wrist
I was in a clean, warm house
Nowhere near the war (2006, 40).

The whole topography of expatriate personality is captured through the image of Lascar Jonnie. In the 1930s, twenty per cent of Britain's maritime labour force was made of Indian seaman, called Lascars. Many stayed at ports like Glasgow, some as itinerant salesmen, peddling their wares in remote parts of Scotland.

Dharker empathise with them as she finds them in similar situation as she is now. These seamen form a group; support each other in difficult times. Newcomer found a great comfort in this group. Whenever Lascar Jonnie goes door to door as a salesman, he feels a wall already existing between them. Some are kind enough to offer tea and ask name. They tell name as Jonnie to protect themselves from racial and national prejudices. It underscores the fact that in foreign country how insignificant their existence is. They have to live life at the peripheries.

"The captain chooses not to hear
Our songs, or know our names.
Allauddin, Mohammed, Mubarak, Bismillah.
Our names are prayers.
Someone must be saying them tonight
In the other country" (2006, 57).

As a result, the migrant often finds himself/herself at the peripheries of the imagined community of a host country and such otherisation produces an anxiety which invariably drives one towards imaginative reunion with the country of one's origin. Alienation in the host country and irrepressible yet impossible attempt to unite with the country of origin therefore exists simultaneously within the diasporic imaginary.

These diasporas are expatriate minority communities who regard their ancestral homeland as their true and ideal home and the place to which they or their descendants would eventually return. There is a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background. The notion of old country is often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore. This is precisely why authors like Salman Rashdi have consistently explored the significance of 'imaginary homelands' that migrant recurrently invent out of "scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated people loved". These attempts become necessary because the experience of migration involves both physical and cultural displacements which produce several strains on one's sense of self. It is because host country often subjects the migrant to both material deprivations and cultural exclusions based on diverse considerations of race, religion, language, and ethnicity and so on.

A feast! We swoop
 On a whole family of dishes.
 The tarka dal is Auntie Hameeda
 The karahai ghost is Khala Aameena
 The gajar halva is Appa Rasheeda.
 Kartar, Rohini, Robert,
 Ayesha, Sangam, I
 Bound by the bread we break,
 Sharing out our continent (2001, 27).

To overcome this pervasive sense of alienation, otherisation and voicelessness that migrants seek refuge within the rubrics of nostalgia. They attempt to discover the routes through which they can reattach themselves to their cultural roots. In the process their identities are shaped substantially which the exigencies of migrancy have threatened to erase, bend or distort. Hence, loss and nostalgia are the recurring feelings that inform diasporic literature.

I need sarson da sag,
 Nothing will satisfy me,
 And hot makki di roti
 With butter melting over it.

I want her to break the roti
 Scoop up the gravy
 And keep putting in my mouth
 Until my hunger is done.
 I need to run out to my father's land
 And sit in the ganna field
 Where I can hear the sugar growing,
 Juice rushing up through the stem
 To reach my waiting mouth (2006, 103).

In a poem 'Not a Muslim Burial' from *'I speak for the Devil'* the poem's persona feels alienated by her own religion, her own country and also feels displaced by the host country. She expresses

the desire that after her death the ashes were placed on a train directed to a city she has never been to.

No one must claim me.

On the journey I will need

No name, no nationality,

Let them label the remains

Lost Property (2001, 29).

Movement and transition in Dharker's poetry represent both the physical journeys of one's body through borders and continents, and the metaphorical journeys of self-discovery of a person.

The poem is about home, and about how difficult it is to feel at home in one specific place. In other poems from the same collection, this same feeling of homelessness acquires more positive connotations. In 'Halfway', the last poem from *The Terrorist at My Table*, for example, the speaker ends the poem saying:

Halfway home or halfway gone,

we have grown accustomed now

to travelling on the faultline

of daily miracles (2006, 158).

Routine matters of travel like border, passport, ticket, check-in, and seat-belts receives new significance with her poetic mediations. These matters make her muse over meaning of the existence, fractured selves, illusoriness of man-made boundaries, etc.

In all her journey she longs for a favoured sanctuary which she claims she could find it at the intersection. She longs for a better state with which she could identify herself.

I think my body is asking

To be in some promised place.

I think my body is begging

For another face.

Yesterday I put my name

Inside the parcel, and sent it off

By courier, marked 'Urgent'

To some address

Unknown (2001, 12).

She feels captive in the new country but as time passes on, she becomes familiar with the surrounding and the surrounding also gets familiar with her. After husband leaves for duty, she is left all alone to adjust with the new city. She enjoys the process of knowing and getting known to the new city. She has found temporary existential solution to the problem. Man has to adjust to the surrounding in the game of survival.

Chance has put us here

Chance keeps us here,

Two willing captives,

The city and I,

Given to each other

Like a gift (2006, 90).

The speaker refers to light, skies, traffic which negates the purpose of the boundaries. Through the beautiful image of glass 'the face we share, reflected in each other like a gift' Dharker has underscored that nothing is fixed.

The impossibility of fixity takes the form of a continuous transformation, a constant self-refashioning, that careful "making, crafting, / plotting" (2001, 13) that Dharker considers essential for her own survival as a dislocated woman and as a writer. In 'Stitched', the poet draws on that same image of stitching and seaming used by Derek Walcott in his Nobel Lecture and by other dislocated writers. In the poem the speaker feels as if she were stitched with "some foreign stuff / that pointed out the parts / where I'd been mended" (2001, 19), to the point that she thinks that somebody would put her out with the garbage. Even though the stitched girl survives, she still does not blend, and is tempted to make up for it by doing "dangerous somersaults / . . . jump and dance and run" (2001, 19). The poem ends with the realisation that perhaps she should start the process of self-refashioning all over again.

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry is an example of these multifaceted negotiations. Her poetry not only deals with the traditional

binaries of 'home' and 'away' but also the complex negotiations that mark the many lives of the female migrant who may find herself marginalised both within and outside the domestic space. At the same time, her poetry also manifests the persistent endeavours to move beyond such marginalisation by finding a voice that consistently challenges essentialistic and monochromatic constructs and the violence necessitated by them. This poetic voice helps to open up, what Bill Ashcroft defines as "the liberating region of representational undecideability...a nomadic space within and between the institutional and political specificities of nation states" (Ashcroft, 11).

Dharker has been inspired by Sufi poetry and philosophy. Dharker describes the Sufi poets in the following way particular by Pakistani Sufi singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (*Spiritual Journeys*).

[they] are very much of the world, very much involved with the things of the world. They never saw the need to turn their backs on the everyday world, and in a lot of ways Sufism has this idea of continuous recreation of the self. . . . For me it fits in with what I feel I'm doing, which is constantly making myself up, as a person, and as a poet, as a writer. Again as I said, the idea of lifting the veil between the person and the spiritual world. So there is a kind of circular movement back, through the Sufi poets perhaps and the Sufi singers to reaching for something else in the last collection (*Spiritual Journeys*).

In the volume *Leaving Fingerprints* her quest for identity culminates into quest for spirituality which leads her to cosmic awareness of human existence.

In *Leaving Fingerprints*, the landscape becomes benign, friendly and gentle. Hence, the poem begins with "I know this frosted landscape / better than it knows itself, its layers / a busy clock of history, still ticking" (Dharker, 49). She is offering her readers a very different landscape from that portrayed in the previous collections.

In her earlier collections' images were connected to fleeing, displacement, religious anomalies, etc. In *Leaving Fingerprints* images give the impression that the speaker is more attuned to the land, to the slow ticking of time, and to the names of those who have inhabited the land, fingerprinted it.

The process of making culture—and therefore also the process of writing poetry—is envisioned as a constant burying and resurfacing of things past, as a sort of possible resurrecting, like the fallen leaves/words that are reborn green in “My friend the poet says he has become a tree”.

In an interview for the BBC World Service Dharker explains the image of fingerprints in the following way:

“It felt like a home-coming because I discovered, when I started writing, that there was a whole army of other writers behind me, and they were my real family. And that’s what a lot of *Leaving Fingerprints* is about. The other people who leave their fingerprints on you, not just the people you love, but the people you meet every day, the people on the street, the conversations you hear, the poets you read, the songs, the lullabies, the food you eat, all of those things leave fingerprints. And my suggestion is that that is the ancestry in the end” (*Spiritual Journeys*).

In *Leaving Fingerprints* alienating landscapes and poems about disconnection and puzzlement are replaced by the realisation that an ancestry can be found in fingerprints, in the traces that everyday things leave behind. It needs to be clarified that for the poet the image of fingerprints does not convey the idea of fixity of one’s identity, but rather that of fluidity. In ‘Capturing the Latent’, for example, she writes:

Take something that changes constantly,
say water. How could you ever hope
to replicate the way it feels?
So too with the fingerprints. Don’t
imagine it is fixed (2009, 101).

In this volume, Dharker appears a kind observer of her life and surrounding. In the volume, she depicts her casual observations, her experiences and then reflects upon them. Very small objects like, spoon, cup, box, frame, wood, collar, button, sleeve, pebble, shell, bucket, etc., become part of her poetry. She also muses over small animals like lizards, ants, parakeet, moth, etc. She has referred to Mumbai dubbawalas (tiffin-box carriers), legend of Anarkali and the movie and songs of the film *Moghle*

Azam, popular Hindi songs like 'yadnajaye', poems by Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, recipes of chutney and yogurt and many such things. Dharker stands aloof and reflects on the things surrounding her. In the course of time to her poetic vision things appear formless and she perceives fluidity in the things. She finds interconnections among the things and later on she perceives oneness among them.

As Arundhati Subramaniam has observed about this volume, "in these poems, the only things that is never get lost is the Bombay tiffin-box. All the other things which are missing or about to go missing speak to each other—a person, a place, a recipe, a language, a talisman. Whether or not they want to be identified or found, they still send each other messages, scattering a trail of clues, leaving fingerprints." In the poem 'Hand-me down', the interconnectedness is expressed in the following ways.

"Everything here has come
From somewhere else.
That washing line is a piece
Of packing string.
The shelf a cardboard box.
The city has been taken and given,
Named, renamed, possessed, passed on,
Passed through my hands,
My hand-me-down.
One day when I am ready
I too will hand it on.
These lines have been written
And written again in different
Times with altered names in other tongues
To repeat the old story in fumbling words.
Just for today I'll call them mine" (2009, 73).

Different recipes are made by adding different materials into yogurt, differing from one region to another with regionwise specificities. Similarly herself is altered when it has to adjust to

the surrounding for which she hardly has any choice. Other forces act harshly on her own self that she becomes detached from her real self. However, her original self doesn't get altered.

"I could reduce the salt and add sugar
 For sweet lassi
 Or mango pulp for mango lassi
 I could fry mustard seeds in a pot and add
 The yogurt to a cup of gram flour, green chillies
 and bay leaves to make a Bombay kadhi.
 In all these ways I could take this yogurt
 And give it a new identity.
 But I want to think about this.
 Such a perfect bowl of yogurt.
 Ask the yogurt what it thinks.
 Ask it what it wants to be" (2009, 85).

The speaker is searching for her perfect identity like a perfect bowl of yogurt.

Through the metaphor of yogurt and river, she resolves the mystery of human existence. She has understood the essential difference between the essence or spirit and outward forms of the self. As critic Arundhati Subramaniam commented on her poetry "There is an exultant celebration of a self that strips of layers of superfluous identity with grace and abandon, only to discover that it has not diminished, but grown larger, generous, and more inclusive." Her self outgrows into universal being: the spirit which encompasses every being of the universe.

In the poem 'What the River Says', the same theme is reinforced.

"When I pass you
 I will bring you the scent of far meadows
 When I pass you
 Buffaloes will find a voice and sing
 When I pass you
 I will take nothing, not your breath
 And not your fingerprints" (2009, 139).

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry seems to be concerned especially with every day, 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*).

Thus, Dharker in *Leaving Fingerprints* with her poetic imagination and sharpened sensibilities has explored interconnections between local and the global and then to the cosmic synergies. In her quest to understand 'Who am I?' she gradually transgresses her narrow considerations of her own self mainly religion, gender, nation, etc., and comes to terms with ultimate reality of human existence. Her quest continues even after death and at last unites her own self to the five basic elements of the cosmos.

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