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“There’s something to be said, / after all, / for giving in”: An Analysis of the Veil in Imtiaz Dharker’s *Purdah* and *I Speak for the Devil*

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Abstract:

The veil is often used as a potent symbol by both ends of the ideological spectrum. It is often associated with women’s oppression and misogyny of Islam on the one hand and a symbol of cultural identity and rejection of the gaze on the other hand. This paper attempts to look at Imtiaz Dharker’s *Purdah* and *I Speak for the Devil*, to understand how she engages with the veil and “purdah of the mind.” The paper also looks at the Islamic feminist debate about the veil and the questions about agency, morality, choice and selfhood that it raises. By drawing upon the theoretical tools of Judith Butler, Toril Moi and Iris Marion Young, the paper looks at, how the “lived body” acts and is acted upon by its socio-cultural context and how Dharker questions the pre-discursive understanding of sex.

Keywords:

purdah, honour, agency, religion, female body

The West in general, sees the veil as a symbol of the “Otherness of Islam” and denounces it as a metonym of “Muslim women’s oppression” (Watson 141) while many indigenous writers and Muslims look at the veil as liberatory for women. Claire Dwyer, in her study of the photographic representations of Islam, has talked about the “fetishisation of the veil as the signifier of both Oriental women and of the Orient.” She argues that for the West, the veil has come to symbolize a variety of things, “mystery, exoticism, forbiddenness [*sic*], sensuality, sexuality, backwardness, resistance, domination, passivity, religious fundamentalism.” In addition to this, the veil also stands for the West’s attempts to “undress Muslims” and make them the object of their gaze and the “Muslims’ equally obdurate resistance to such efforts.”¹ For Helen Watson, and for many other feminists, *hijab* is not always a symbol of women’s oppression. It can also be a deliberate act of choice. Instead of stripping women of their individual identity, it can signify an assertion of their Islamic heritage. It can thus be seen as, not “anti-feminist”, but “feminism in reverse”. The voluntary donning of the veil is an intermeshing of sacred and secular concerns and a reaction against the myopic insight of secular feminism of the West.

The female body acts, or rather, it is made to act as a site over which issues of larger importance are argued. It acts as a signifier of social, cultural and communal values, so much so, that it ceases to signify its own self. It acts as a symbol of identity and a marker of difference. Female body in Dharker’s corpus is ‘made’ by patriarchy and many of Dharker’s personae make an attempt to ‘unmake’ this body and carve out a new identity for themselves. The end result of some of these struggles might be utopian, but Dharker always narrates the dialectics of the struggle. Purity and honour acquire a

specific meaning through the figure of women. Women’s sexuality is constructed as vulnerable, capable of dishonouring the family/community and in need of protection. As Michel Foucault has suggested, women’s sexuality acts as a “dense transfer point for relations of power”². Different meanings are ascribed upon women’s bodies by external entities.

The concept of veiling revolves around the idea of modesty, as outlined in the Qur’an. The seventh chapter of the Qur’an talks of the difference between shame and nakedness. Men and women, both are instructed to preserve modesty, but there are specific references to proper female dress. First, there are the basic clothes which cover the body, setting civilized society apart from the animal world. Second, are ‘fine clothes’ which are an indicator of taste, status and wealth. Third, are the robes of piety. *Hijab*, in this sense is the robe of piety which indicates the wearer’s religiosity and modesty (Watson). Modesty, an extremely paradoxical concept, refers to a deeply felt state and at the same time is associated with a variety of behavioural codes. It is both felt and to be shown. Therefore, it is not enough for a woman to be modest, she has to veil herself to make the world aware of her pious, modest demeanour. The most explicit injunction about female modesty occurs in Sura 24³:-

Say to believers, that they cast down
Their eyes and guard their private parts;
That is purer for them. God is aware of the things they work.
And say to the believing women, that they
cast down their eyes and guard their private
parts, and reveal not their adornment
save such as is outward.

Sir William Muir, in his *Life of Mahomet*, talks of the story about Muhammad surprising Zainab, the wife of his adopted son, Zaid. He was dumbstruck by her beauty. When Zaid heard of this, he offered to divorce his wife for Muhammed.⁴ Irrespective of the origin of the institution, *purdah* is not just an external garment but a code of conduct. Jasbir Jain calls it, “the oldest form of colonization, of domination and of control”. The female body becomes a geographical territory which needs to be conquered and subjugated. In South Asia, *purdah* is associated with the advent of Islam but this is a fallacious idea. *Purdah* is not a specifically Islamic institution. Jasbir Jain, talks of the newly urbanized Bengali women in the nineteenth century, who led extremely restricted lives because of the alien environment. The ideological significance of *ghoonghat* is similar to that of *purdah*. *Purdah*, as she indicates has its basis in the “principle of inequality (not necessarily difference) and establishes itself on the dual strategy of control and exclusion”. *Purdah*, creates “separate worlds and symbolic shelter”, according to Hanna Papanek. She talks of the institution of sex segregation as different from other kinds of segregation because of its added association with “mutually protective interdependence.” It creates a division of labour which is based on “asymmetrical relations between the sexes.”

Imtiaz Dharker, in “*Purdah I*” (*Purdah*), begins by talking of *purdah* as a “kind of safety/ The body finds a place to hide” (4-5). She offers a caustic critique of the society which forces women to hide, the veil on their faces is “like the earth that falls/ on coffins after they put the dead men in”(7-8). The safety or in Hanna Papanek’s words, the

“symbolic shelter”, that purdah offers, strips women of their identity and their sense of self. Dharker also problematizes the concept of shame. ‘Shame’, an attribute which is acquired or rather imposed on women, “came quite naturally” (3). So deeply ingrained are the gender norms and expectations, that boundaries between what one wants to be and what one ought to be are erased. The poem is not about a single woman, it is about many such women who have been the victims of oppression:

She half-remembers things
from someone else’s life,
perhaps from yours, or mine-
carefully carrying what we do not own
between the thighs, a sense of sin. (14-18)

A woman’s sexuality is seen as a threat to the honour of family/ community/ society and it has to be controlled, lest it lead to sin. Sheeba K, in her paper “The Veiled Bodies: An Inverted Gaze”, delivered in Jawaharlal Nehru University, talked of the inverted gaze of women behind the veil. For her, purdah is liberatory. It allows women to gaze and not be gazed at. Instead of being repressive, it allows them to observe without being observed. Purdah allows women to be signifying and subjectifying selves. The persona of Dharker’s poem, “Purdah I”, who began by learning shame, is “inching past herself” (28) towards the end of the poem. It also suggests that observing purdah has made her lose her sense of a coherent and undivided self. Donning the veil fragments her very being, “She stands outside herself/ sometimes in all four corners of a room” (25-26). One’s existence is ratified by others, a privilege denied to purdah clad women, as Dharker says, “doors keep opening/ inward and again/ inward” (35-37). Rashmi Chaturvedi, in her essay “Unveiling Womanhood: Dharker’s ‘Purdah’”, argues that in this poem a sudden shift takes place. The “subject takes the position of the subjectifier and constitutes the identity of the other. . .” By doing so, she not only constitutes others but also creates herself afresh.

In “Purdah II”, Dharker talks of her religious identity as a “coin of comfort”, in an alien land. She continues to associate purdah with death, like the previous poem – “Your mind throws black shadows/ on marble cooled by centuries of dead” (3-4). The “coin of comfort” offered by Islam is snatched away by greedy and lecherous religious clerics. Their words are “unsoiled by sense, / pure rhythm on the tongue” (16-17). The Haji, as we are told, “had nothing holy in his look.”(26) Religious identity, instead of offering solace, becomes a disturbing presence in the lives of women.

Honour, as indicated by Frank Stewart, is an extremely paradoxical concept and the most interesting aspect of honour is how men’s honour is affected by the activities of their womenfolk.⁵ Shahla Haeri, taking Stewart’s notion of honour as her premise, argues how honour is personified and objectified in the person of a woman. Thus, while men possess honour like they possess other things, women are honour, “They represent honour, they symbolize honour; they are honour.” This concept of honour becomes even more stringent in a foreign land because there, one inhabits a world of shifting realities, and the urge to hold on to one’s honour/ religious/ cultural affiliation is greater.

Dharker poignantly points out:

They have all been sold and bought,
the girls I knew,

unwilling virgins who had been taught,
especially in a strangers’ land, to bind
their brightness tightly round,
whatever they might wear,
in the purdah of the mind. (52-58)

Purdah, is not just an external garment. It is an ideology, a controlling mechanism and a code of conduct. It is both literal and symbolic. Deniz Kandiyoti, talks of “classic patriarchy” in North Africa, the Muslim Middle East (including Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran), and South and East Asia (specifically, India and China). She argues about how women contribute to their own subordination. The bride enters her husband’s house as an individual, with practically no rights, but she can create a place for herself in the household by producing a male offspring. Women collude in their own subordination because of the cyclical nature of power in classic patriarchy. They endure hardship and suffering as brides, but this is eventually superseded by the control and authority that they get over their subservient daughters-in law. Despite the initial subservience imposed on them by classic patriarchy, women resist change because the old order is not replaced by empowering alternatives. They claim their half of the patriarchal bargain – protection and security. She says later in the essay:

It is significant that Khomeini’s exhortations to keep women at home found enthusiastic support among many Iranian women despite the obvious elements of repression. The implicit promise of increased male responsibility restores the integrity of their original patriarchal bargain in an environment where the range of options available to women is extremely restricted. (283)

She urges them to come out of purdah, to assert themselves and blindfold those who had veiled them. Dharker talks of individual rebellions such as that of Saleema, who despite everything, “poured out her breasts to fill the cup/ of his white hands...”(111-112) After leading a conventional life, she rebelled, “At last a sign, behind the veil, / of life. . .”(121-122), but her life came back full circle, from conformity, to rebellion, to conformity, and she ended up as a submissive wife. Naseem ran away and was considered dead by her family. She is with the man who had to set her free, “trying to smile. . .”(146) The poem talks of various kinds of rebellions, but they fail to emancipate women from the drudgery and squalor of repressive, conservative structures. They shed the external garment but the “purdah of the mind” remains and continues to enslave them. A woman’s life is “under the proprietorship of society, religion and family.” The resultant experience of rebellion might lead to despair and disappointment but it is still a “lived experience”, and emancipation for Dharker’s personae might not bring a total release from all kinds of bondage, but it “does bring the freedom of choices and of will” (Chaturvedi 259).

In Dharker’s poetry, there is an “emphasis on the multiplicity and fragmentation of the female subject, revealed in the use of varied pronouns, which slide into one another in the course of the same poem; the related emphasis on the intertwining and replication of female histories; and the portrayal of the female subject as victim-agent” (Chand 167). “Victim-agent”, is a term borrowed from Rajeswari Sundar Rajan. She argues that if victim and agent are seen as two separate labels for the female subject, victimhood being associated with helplessness and passivity, all feminist politics will be rendered “either inauthentic or unnecessary.” In order to see the victim as subject, one should see the condition of pain as the “very condition of a move towards no-pain,

without, at the same time obviating the need for the operation of sympathy”⁶ (35). “Purdah I”, for instance, starts with the third person singular, which by the time we reach the fourth stanza moves to an identification with others:

She half remembers things
from someone else’s life,
perhaps from yours, or mine (14-16)

Later, in the poem, it changes to “we”, “carrying what we do not own/ between the thighs. . .” (17-18) But towards the end, “she stands outside herself. . .” (25) Female subjectivity, in Dharker’s poem is multiple and fragmented, as argued by Sherry Chand. Similarly, in “Purdah II”, there are multiple and fragmented subjectivities, “There are so many of me. . .”, which reminds Chand of T. S Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. But unlike Tiresias, an androgynous, blind seer, the speaker of “Purdah II”, is an Asian Muslim woman living in Britain.

While *Purdah* offers a picture of women struggling behind the veil, *I Speak for the Devil* is about women who are “possessed” – possessed by the devil and a sense of self. The very first poem of the collection is a subversive and defiant shedding of the veil. It is about women who realize that they are mistaken into thinking that they didn’t have a choice. *Purdah* is defined as the “black veil of a faith/ that made me faithless/ to myself. . .” (9-11). While the women in “Purdah I” and “Purdah II” were “lulled/ into thinking it had found a home”, in “Honour Killing” they realize that the maulvi’s words were contrary to the egalitarian voice of Islam. The religious clerics, who force women to adopt the veil, “gave my god a devil’s face/ and muffled my own voice” (13-14).

The debate on Islamic feminism discusses the issue of *hijab* in many interesting ways. The debate proper began in February 1994, when Afsaneh Najmabadi delivered a talk in the School of Oriental and African Studies, in which she discussed two women’s magazines, *Zanan* and *Farzaneh*, both published in Tehran. She discussed how they provided a platform for dialogue between religious and secular feminists. She termed this reform movement, “Islamic Feminism.” Islamic feminists try like secular feminists to work towards the betterment of women’s legal and social status but they do so from within an Islamic framework. They have raised the issue of *ijtihad* – a revisionist reading of the Qur’an and the right of women to bring to light the egalitarian voice of Islam. Nayereh Tohidi defines Islamic feminism as a movement of women who “have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female-supportive verses of the Qur’an in their fight for women’s rights, especially for women’s access to education.”⁷ While Islamic feminists work from within an Islamic framework, for a Muslim feminist, religion is a matter of “personal faith, as a cultural identity and as a response to spiritual needs in a world increasingly engulfed in spiritual impoverishment” (Moghissi 141). According to Moghissi, Islam is reconcilable with feminism only when feminist concerns are not circumscribed by Islam.

Imtiaz Dharker offers a critique of patriarchy but she does not repudiate religion in its entirety. She talks of Islam, as a “coin of comfort”. She says in one of her interviews:

For many, many years I’ve been saying Islam is a great religion, I can see that everything in the religion is right, its attention to women is right,

but it is being badly, badly misused by men. And I don’t think it’s just a case of Islam being misused, I think Hinduism is being misused, Christianity has been misused for centuries-they are all being misused to oppress women. The ones who are writing and interpreting the religions are all men; it is a very simple way of maintaining the status quo, the power relations.⁸

In *I Speak for the Devil*, she talks denotatively and connotatively for the devil. In “Honour Killing”, she sheds both nationality – “At last I’m taking off this coat,/ this black coat of a country/ that I swore for years was mine, . . .” (1-3), and religion-“I’m taking off this veil, / this black veil of a faith/ that made me faithless to myself, . . .” (8-11) From faith in Islam, Dharker shifts to a faith in oneself. Her poems revolve around the discourse of rights and liberty, instead of Islam or Shari’a. In “Women Bathing”, she talks of the murmurs of the “waters of the Alhambra” which urges women to shed their veils and bathe in the waters of freedom. The poem depicts how women give up the shackles that confine them and embrace a fluid notion of the self. For Dharker, purdah is not a “symbolic shelter” but a literal and symbolic imprisonment. In Dharker’s poems, there is a portrayal of the suppressive force of patriarchy but at the same time, there is also a very vivid portrayal of a strong resistance to such forces. In “Purdah II”, while the society tries to keep female bodies under wraps or within the domain of domesticity, there are women who refuse to do that-

They veiled their eyes
with heavy lids.
They hid their breasts,
but not the fullness of their lips. (59-62)

In another poem, “What the Women said”, Dharker, offers a series of images, “hurrying out of the garden”, “hair loose and wild”, “out of breath” and “purple stain on your neck, / like a bruise of fruit.” This poem is an imagistic expression of female sexuality. The female body is not just acted upon, it acts and sometimes acts in thoroughly unconventional and subversive ways. In “Honour Killing”, the poet’s persona sheds the ideas formulated about women and the identities imposed on them. She not only strips off the *burqa*, the *mangalsutra* and her clothes, she also sheds,

. . . this skin,
and then the face, the flesh,
the womb. (21-23)

This poem is a Butlerian critique of not just gender but sex as well. Judith Butler reworks Foucault’s notion of power to see how power is constitutive of identity formation. A comparison of different feminist positions like those of Beauvoir, Irigaray and Wittig confirms Butler in the belief that being a woman is an ongoing discursive process, and gender identity is performatively constituted. Gender is a series of acts whose congealment over a period of time gives the appearance of a natural kind of being. It does not follow sex, rather, it is a “free floating artifice”, an interpretation of “sexed nature” and above all a discursive/ cultural means which establishes sex as prediscursive. The trajectory of sex, gender and desire is turned on its head to show how a regulatory regime of sexuality produces gender identity, which then produces a sexed nature.

Dharker, in “Honour Killing” gets rid of gender and later, sex, as well. Her persona tries to explore what she is beyond these categories. The very process of discovering one’s identity has to begin with shattering the premises on which the previous identities were founded. She says-

Let’s see
what I am in here
when I squeeze past
the easy cage of bone. (24-27)

In her poems, Imtiaz Dharker writes about the female body, and in the process of doing that re-writes the female body. The female body in her poems is a site which has been written over by patriarchy and Dharker’s attempts throughout her poems is to get rid of these external, ideological trappings and ‘plot’, ‘stich’ and ‘draw’ herself all over again. In, “Honour Killing” she concludes with the following words-

Let’s see
what I am out here,
making, crafting,
plotting
at my new geography. (28-32)

In one of her poems, called, “Tongue”, Dharker, says, “There’s something to be said, / after all, / for giving in.” She has given in to the conservative norms of a male dominated and male governed society which does not allow women to talk freely about their sexuality. She does not talk about it in an explicit manner but, as she says, she has to say something for “giving in” or succumbing to such orthodox norms. She does that by talking about female sexuality and desire in an oblique and implicit manner, as discussed in the above mentioned poems.

Simone de Beauvoir had famously proclaimed in *The Second Sex* that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (295). Judith Butler’s reading of this phrase argues about the ambiguous nature of the verb “become” by Beauvoir. To become is not just a process of being constructed or enculturated but also of constructing ourselves.⁹ It is this aspect of being constructed and also constructing that one sees in Dharker’s poems. Both Beauvoir and Dharker then infuse the analysis of identity formation with agency and thus emancipatory potential. To look at domination as all encompassing, totalizing and monolithic creates an epistemological determinism. Oppression, as indicated by Butler, is a dialectical force which thrives on individual participation.

What we see in Dharker is what Toril Moi called the “lived body”. As put forth succinctly by Iris Marion Young, it is a “unified idea of a lived body acting and experiencing in a specific socio-cultural context; it is body in situation. For existentialist theory, *situation* denotes the produce of *facticity* and *freedom*”(Young, 221.) The actual, material, physical and social environment and the different aspects of a person’s bodily existence constitute *facticity*. But, the individual also has the power to construct herself in relation to her facticity. It is thus a body in situation¹⁰. The idea

of the “lived body” acknowledges the concept of being conditioned by the socio-cultural environment that one inhabits. At the same time, it also talks of the ways in which each individual responds to these “unchosen facts” in her own way. Imtiaz Dharker’s poems reveal an interesting interplay of facticity and freedom – the dual forces of the lived body. The poems discussed above and many others show this threefold movement from being oppressed to a dismantling and dismembering of the oppressed body and lastly an attempt at self fashioning.

Notes

¹ Dwyer, Claire. “ ‘Ninja Women’: The Representations of Muslim Women in the West.” Quoted by Anouar Majid. “The Politics of Feminism in Islam”. p. 66

2 Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1981. Cited by Aysha Ghani, “Abducted Identities: Pakistan, its Partition and its Abducted Women

3. Cited by Papanek

4. Cited by Jasbir Jain, “Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah”

5. Stewart, Frank. *Honour*. University of Chicago Press. Cited by Shahla Haeri, “The Politics of Dishonour-Rape and Power in Pakistan”

6 Cited by Sherry Chand, p. 168.

7. Tohidi, Nayereh. “Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran”. Cited by Valentine M. Moghadam. “Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: Towards a Resolution of the Debate”. p. 27

8. *Just Between Us: Women Speak About Their Writing*. p. 134

9. “To *become* a woman is a purposive and appropriate set of acts, the acquisition of skill, a ‘project’, to use Sartrean terms, to assume a certain corporeal style and significance. When ‘become’ is taken to mean ‘purposefully assume or embody’, it seems that Simone de Beauvoir is appealing to a voluntaristic account of gender.” “Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*”, 36.

10. “*Situation*, then is the way that the facts of embodiment and social and physical environment appear in light of the projects a person has.” “Lived Body versus Gender” (221)

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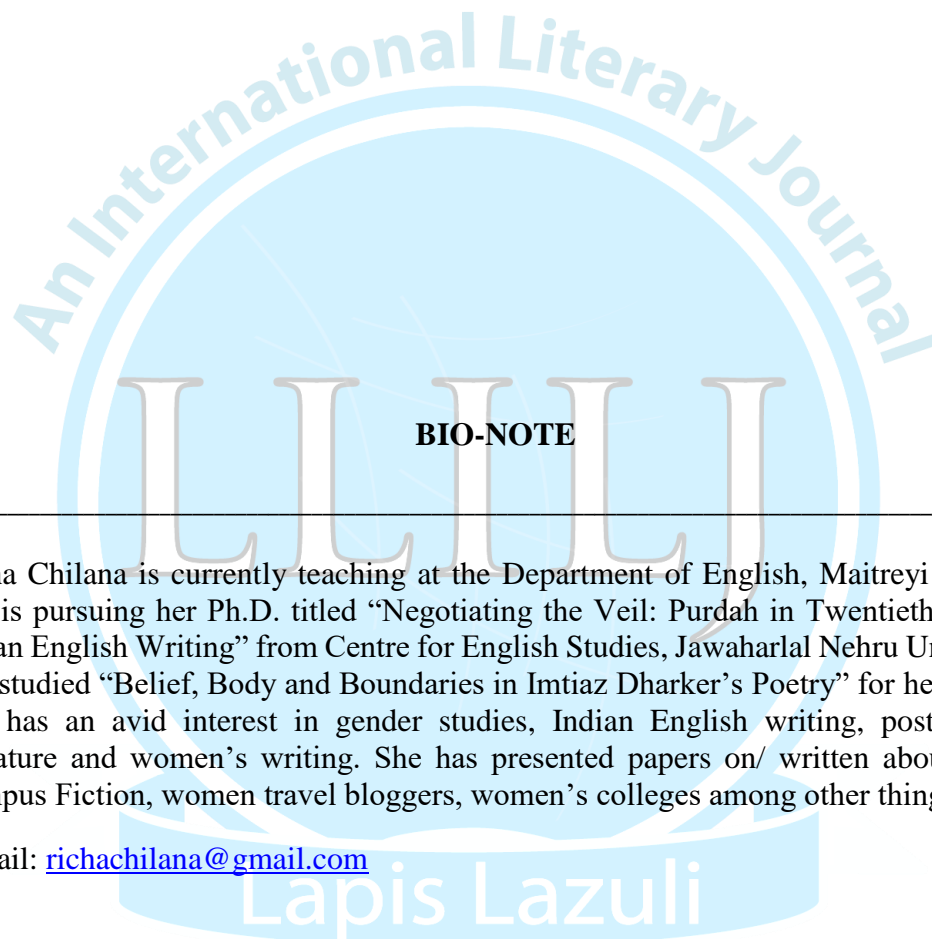
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