

Veil as Eye: A Deconstructive Reading of Imtiaz Dharker's "Purdah I"

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Exploring new writers is a bound duty of a dedicated reader. Writers are warriors who fight their emotions and bring out the same through the sword of pen. Why do they do so? For whom are they writing? It is for the readers to experience the writers' imagination, emotions, and life on the whole. They explore new ideas and thoughts in various styles. They indicate something new towards the truth. They fantasize more than they think it normal. Such writers are penning to win the hearts of readers. So it is the reader's responsibility to curtail such writings to spread in the world. This paper tends to unveil the writings of Imtiaz Dharker by demonstrating her poems written creatively. Because according to Shelley's view in his "A Defence of Poetry", poets are indestructible. They are not like other creators of arts like music, dance and architecture. For him, a poet is a creator of social laws which teaches the art of living with moral values. Poets play dual role of legislator and prophet. And he knows to express the need of today as well as the future scenario.

But poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain

propinquity with the beautiful and the true, that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. [Enright, 2015, p. 228]

Veil is Eye – a veil is a piece of fine material worn by women to protect or conceal the face. And eyes are the organs of sight which helps to view, observe, survey, examine or scrutinize. The paper highlights the former [veil] will never hinder a woman's sight [eye], view or observation but it serves as a tool to look through. Hence veil itself serves as eye.

Deconstruction is a form of philosophical and literary analysis, derived mainly from work begun in the 1960s by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, that questions the fundamental conceptual distinctions, or "oppositions," in Western philosophy through a close examination of the language and logic of philosophical and literary texts. Deconstruction's beginning in France in the 1950s, the structuralist movement, analysed various cultural phenomena as systems of "signs" and developed "metalanguages" in which the different sign systems could be described. Deconstruction offered a powerful critique of the possibility of creating detached, scientific metalanguages and to understand verbal works of art (especially poetry) as complex constructions made up of different and contrasting levels of literal and nonliteral meanings. Deconstructive readings, in contrast, treated works of art as instances of the intractable conflicts

between meanings of different types. They generally examined the individual work not as a self-contained artefact but as a product of relations with other texts or discourses, literary and non-literary.

Roland Barthes "Death of the Author" is applied as a tool for deconstructing Dharker's poem "Purdah I"

The removal of the Author (one could talk here with Brecht of a veritable 'distancing', the Author diminishing like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage) is not merely an historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text (or – which is the same thing – the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent). The temporality is present. (Philip, 2001, p. 187)

By the removal of the author, the text is read in such a way in all its levels the author is absent hence making the temporary the 'reader' present. The language used by the author, distance the author himself. The figure of the author diminishes at the far end of the stage. One may ask while deconstructing the author's writing itself, where lies the need of the biography of the author? It is quoted from Barthes again before penning the biography of the author.

No doubt it has always been that way. As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. The sense of this phenomenon, however, has varied; in ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose

'performance' – the mastery of the narrative code may possibly be admired but never his 'genius'. (Philip, 2001, p. 185- 186)

Imtiaz Dharker is a poet, artist and documentary film-maker. Awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2014, recipient of the Cholmondley Award and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, her collections include *Purdah*, *Postcards from God*, *I Speak for the Devil* and *The Terrorist at My Table*, *Leaving Fingerprints*, and *Over the Moon*. Her poems are on the British GCSE and A Level English syllabus, and she reads with other poets at Poetry Live! events all over the country to more than 25,000 students a year. She has been Poet in Residence at Cambridge University Library, for *Thresholds*, and has recently completed a series of poems based on the Archives of St Paul's Cathedral. She has had ten solo exhibitions of drawings in India, London, New York and Hong Kong. She scripts and directs films, many of them for non-government organisations in India, working in the area of shelter, education and health for women and children.

The text disconnects the author from itself since the origin of the voice has been lost. And only when the author dies, the language begins. The narrative of the author is assumed not by the author but by the mediator, that is the 'reader' or the critic of the age/period in which the text is read. The 'mastery' of the narrator or the author may be admired but not his genius. Hence to admire and appreciate the mastery of the author, the biography of the author is given a space.

Purdah is a practice in certain Muslim and Hindu Societies of screening women from men or strangers. Especially by means of curtail. Dharker herself states it as a safety for women in the beginning of her poem "Purdah I.", "Purdah is a kind of safety" (Dharker, 2006). The line quoted above is the first line of the second stanza

and the lines mentioned below are the rest of the lines from the same stanza where Dharker is contradictory to her own statement.

One day they said she was old enough to learn some shame.

She found it came quite naturally (Dharker, 2006)

The words 'Learn' and 'Naturally' are noteworthy to mention here. When a girl grows, she gains knowledge of her body. Her maturity helps her to respect and guard which is taught to practice some new experiences since this maturity comes from nature and not made or caused by people. It is well supported by the Hadith of the Prophet Mohamed:

Prophet [PBUH] said "O Asma when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it doesn't suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to her face and hands." [Abu Dawud, Book 32, No. 4092]

Purdah is a kind of safety as mentioned by Dharker herself in her poem [quoted above]. She compares living women with coffin as 'Coffin is wrapped neatly and earthed'. Had anyone seen the coffin put in the grave without being closed? When a dead body is protected this much why not a beautiful living woman's body which is protected from showcasing it to the eyes of the world?

The body finds a place to hide.

The cloth fans out against the skin

much like the earth falls

on coffins after they put the dead men in (Dharker, 2006)

In an interview with Dharker in *The Hindu*, Arundhati Subramaniam denotes about the poetic journey of Dharker especially about *Purdah* and how it opens the doors inward and inward again and again. And the skin as her borderline. She pessimistically refers the skin as a wall which pushes her into darkness.

Dharker's poetic journey is an interesting one to map. *Purdah*

(1989), her first book explored a somewhat interior politics through an exploration of the multiple resonances of the veil. The result was a work of rich texture and obliquity — of doors "opening inward and again inward", of the subtle interplay of advance and retreat across "the borderline of skin"(Web: The Hindu)

But the veil of *Purdah* is a security which maintains women's modesty to keep her knowledge deeper and deeper inwardly without any distraction. Recognizing the knowledge deeply without the influence of body is so holy which is misunderstood by the author and further lead her to spread this misconception.

In "*Purdah*," she feels that the whole world is darkened since she can't show herself and see the world with her naked eyes.

*We sit still, letting the cloth grow
a little closer to our skin.*

*A light filters inward
through our bodies' walls.*

*Voices speak inside us,
echoing in the spaces we have just
left (Dharker, 2006)*

In one of her other poems "How to Cut a Pomegranate," she narrates how her father taught her to cut pomegranate.

'Never' said my father,

'Never' cut a pomegranate

*Through the heart. It will weep
blood.*

*Treat it delicately, with respect
(Dharker, 2006)*

After all a fruit Pomegranate's emotions are respected by the author and the very thought of the fruit's image is holy and highly spiritual. But the poet's attitude towards women who are alive has not been respected and treated holy. Women are the one who should be treated delicately with respect. Possibly these are the words of her father as mentioned in her poem and not her own, in that case her father, a man who could understand the delicacy of a fruit and

he might have really had a great thought and respect for women too. But if this is the thought of the author, then it contradicts greatly. Because being a woman she should have understood the delicacy of women and she would have respected the respect offered for women of her kind by the religion by implementing the principle of wearing *Purdah* to protect her body that project her with high modesty.

This is a magic fruit,
 So when you split it open, be
 prepared
 For the jewels of the world to
 tumble out,
 More precious than garnets,
 More lustrous than rubies,
 Lit as it from inside
 Each jewel contains a living seed.
 Separate one crystal.
 Hold it up to catch the light.
 Inside is a whole universe.
 No common jewel can give you
 this (Dharker, 2006)

For her, pomegranate is not a common fruit but has the whole universe inside it. Women too are not common. She is unique like the pomegranate fruit who begets children to fill this universe which no man could do.

One could find a similar idea of the light lit from the inside in this poem too. The poet says 'the juice of pomegranate tasted of gardens she had never seen'. Thus the pomegranate helps her to visualize the garden she had never seen which she mentions as 'another home'. A small cloth turned her world into a grave. But in pomegranate, she could imagine the world which she had not seen. That too because of the light lit from inside and the voice inward. That is the moment of one's wisdom unveiled. Here the flow of analysis halts a while to substantiate the title. "Veil is Eye" refers to the wisdom and knowledge which are powerful that can see the unseen. Thus respecting women's body from exposing it to the strangers is holy.

People of Islam, believe "Purdah" as a respectful practice that actually liberates women. It is stressed here once again 'IT LIBERATES WOMEN' because, it brings about an aura of respect. Women are judged not by their physical beauty but by their inner beauty too, which is called as 'mind'. By covering themselves, they are protected from becoming sex objects. And for them, Purdah is an act of faith that enables honour, respect, and dignity. Islam gives privileges for women and the status of women too is exalted by giving them equal rights that of men or more special rights than of men. When a woman covers herself, she stands on a higher level and men also see her and respect her for her intellect, faith, and personality. The physical person is to play no role in social interaction.

Gifts are precious when they are wrapped in tissue paper. This reflects the whole idea of life. Precious things are not exposed. They are protected and to be respected though it is unseen.

It was a whole idea of life
 Concentrated into one thing,
 Wrapped in tissue paper.
 My mother and father carried
 It home, the kind of gift...
 (Dharker, 2006)

Yet another poem on the title "Light" speaks of the lights outside the window. All the lights were on. There was too much of light and the night passed. Light faded the halogens. The light lit from the inside is the light of knowledge which the former president of India Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam quoted as 'the knowledge / dream /light which will never let you sleep'. That "light" will not be passed. The light is on forever and ever to wake the person up from his dream to DREAM. Knowledge is respected without being corrupted by the influence of body.

Another step of her writing is "Tow-Path." In its end, she marks her home in the unknown path. This unknown path (literally) may be the country which she

travelled to, to live further. This is a problem of identity. Showing her face openly without *Purdah* in an unknown country which couldn't identify her. Then, is this a matter of dress which covers one's identity to the open world? It's time to revisit the title 'Veil is Eye' which says that her dress is her identity. So *Purdah* is the identity of her womanliness and spirituality.

Purdah is the principle of modesty which includes behaviour and dress, not only for females but also for males. This statement needs strong reference. So it is quoted from the Holy Quran

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do [Quran, 24:30]

So both men and women are commanded to lower their gaze and guard their modesty.

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons: that is most convenient, that they should be known and not molested. And Allah is oft forgiving, most merciful [Quran, 33:59]

It is also stated in the verse no. 24:60 that the rules are relaxed for elderly women. There is no blame on them if they lay aside their garments but they should not display their beauty. It is best for them to be modest. So clothing doesn't need to be drab. It has all rights for both the sexes to wear cloth to enhance their beauty as well as to cover nakedness. But the most important thing is to be modest and righteous.

Allah says in yet another place in the Holy Quran verse no 33:53, "And when you ask [the prophet's wives] for anything you want, ask them from before a screen: that makes for greater purity for your heart and for theirs". This indicates that women

can talk to men dressed modestly. When men ask, women have to answer and that is produced from the screen. So there is no restriction for their voice to reach the world.

In one of Dharker's interviews she states as follows: "During the Delhi conference," recalls Dharker,

someone in the audience asked whether Indian writers felt that they had a duty to foster Indian culture, to create a synthesis between East and West, between tradition and modernity. I replied that the result of such a synthesis was likely to be a synthetic response." The "back to the roots" obscurantism clearly needs to be resisted at various levels." (Web: The Hindu)

The problem of her identical crisis is accepted by her. She herself stated that her obscurity needs to be cleared and resisted at various levels which may include her religion - Islam too.

I conclude my paper by trying to prove the misconception of one of the muslim writers about the principles of Islam. Muslim writers are highly recognized by the society as Muslims. But they are not exposing Islam and its principles positively. Writing differently by not changing the meaning and essence of its reality is a sign of a good writer and not by trying to prove the false into true statements and true into false statements.

We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Philip, 2001, p. 189)

Let the readers not be fooled anymore.
They should give the good writings its
future by overthrowing the myths. Let
them enjoy the death of author who is
killing the holy principles and enjoy their
births as readers.

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