



Review Paper

Nation, Gender, Religion in Imtiaz Dharker's *I Speak for the Devil*

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Abstract

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry collection, I Speak for the Devil published in 2002, is an act of rebellion; loud, clear, and unambiguous in its confrontation of religious, gendered, and national identities. The book's contents have been broadly divided into three sections: 'They'll say, She must be from another country', 'The broken umbrella', and 'I speak for the devil'. For Dharker the inaugural moment of this journey is a politically rife incident in Pakistan, highlighting the killing of a woman who had asked for divorce. Her death is glibly manipulated by the façade of honour killing, alerting the readers to geographical spaces, deeply imbricated in social, cultural, and gendered paradigms. Her spatial identity as a South Asian Muslim woman, having relocated to Glasgow, shuttling between the USA and India, shapes and defines her poetic idiom. Aligning the private and the public, Dharker seeks to locate her identity within a specific South Asian spatiality, exploring in the process issues that inform an eclectic mix of the global and the local. Her poems are situated at the intersection of her gendered, her national, and her diasporic identities. They also encapsulate the complexity of the space that takes cognizance of the objectifying tendencies of so much knowledge on the other (the other that does not fit in) while acknowledging that it is neither pure nor totally divorced from its viewing position. Who speaks for whom and how are questions that mark her poetic allegiances and choices. My paper attempts to read these poems as a transgressive journey across boundaries, largely conditioned, determined, and controlled by patriarchal norms.

Keywords: Nation, Gender, Religion, Diaspora, Motherhood.

Introduction

Dharker draws her cultural experiences from three countries. At present, she moves between Bombay and London. Her birthplace was Pakistan and most of her upbringing happened in Glasgow. These transatlantic journeys greatly impacted her writing as she delved deeply into the themes of childhood, exile, voyaging, home, and religious conflict. Fixing the woman's body to a territory is a much-deployed patriarchal ploy to regiment and circumscribe a woman's self-discovery. In the poetry collection *I Speak for the Devil* Dharker critiques this idea. She revisits the notions of motherhood by reconsidering and renegotiating its established and celebrated aspects. For Dharker, a pregnant woman carries the child/devil, a storehouse of explosive ideas that can potentially bust patriarchal supremacy. Being possessed, however, is also about being unfettered as it is this very motherhood that accords her socially sanctioned respect.

Mapping space and subjectivity

Poems in 'they'll say she's from another country' delve into the complexities of the distinctively spatialized subjectivity of the Asian diaspora. The first poem 'Honour Killing' begins with a fierce sense of disillusionment. It is stark, poignant, and disturbingly powerful: "At last I'm taking off this coat, / this

black coat of a country/ that I swore for years was mine, / that I wore them out of habit / than design. / Born wearing it, / I believed I had no choice"¹. With a disarming disavowal of facades, the speaker decides to give up on sartorial choices, made more out of habit than design. She speaks of a specific kind of cultural internalization that ironically leaves no room to choose. The poem begins with a choice that the poet makes and moves back into contexts that had stripped her of all choices. The speaker then moves on from one rejection to another, step by step unearthing and registering her newly discovered self. It almost approximates the gradual, peeling of an onion, layered in years of gendered conditioning. The narrative veers dizzily between awkward self-realization and finally an eerie renunciation of body, 'skin', 'face', 'flesh' and 'womb'. The transcendence that the speaker finally achieves pivots on her breaking free from the cage of life that probably can only be achieved in death: "Let's see/ what I am in here/ when I squeeze past/ the easy cage of bone"¹.

'The orders', next in line begins with the problematics of subjectivity. Graphic images of violence lie strewn glaringly across the poem. It ends with surprising starkness "is that my shoe floating on the water?"¹ as she distances herself to get a more objective perspective. 'Here' is all about the contingencies of moving beyond countries, that one claimed as theirs. As an

unassuming refugee, she elusively moves in search of an identity as the nondescript trails of a past lose their relevance: "Worse than leaving a country/ is walking out of a door/ that will stand open/ because you have told all/ your secrets, and there is nothing/ left to steal"¹. The speaker finds herself homeless, as she is left without memories. There are no new homes that she can pour her heart full of secrets into. The door that she walks out of, signifies everything she has left behind and can never come back to. A sense of losing oneself and one's identity becomes evident as she feels disoriented and misplaced in the newly found cacophony of human voices, voices sans individuality and validity.

'There' as the following poem names itself, is all about reclaiming space, her home. The speaker is speaking from the receiving end. She sees through the choices she never had, choices she never stated, or got the opportunity to articulate. This comes out beautifully in the way her home décor speaks a language she never participated in. Her decision to leave was an intervention in a largely patriarchal discourse that had relegated her voice, and her creativity to an impulsive childishness, puerile and inconsequential. "Now it doesn't matter when I speak. It will always be too late"¹.

'Stitched' her next poem unfolds the multiple, often, disintegrated selves that contribute to the making of diasporic identities. The image of a sutured self, when different languages, and different cultures, pull one in different disparate directions, dominates the poem. Overcome with a sense of non-belonging, the speaker feels like a perennial outsider. A self that needs to be kept together through a forced integration, is looking for a cultural mooring. She is even ready to be unpacked and 'undone' as this desire to fit in has taken a toll on her, and is probably too difficult to sustain.

In the poem 'Announcing the departure...' she almost prefers the space between spaces, the time between times. She finds safety in the tickets, as it allows her the choice to travel. Moving between countries carries a kind of vulnerability that is more reassuring than the mirage called home. At least the travel kept her dreams of finding the 'promised land', her home alive: "Every new city, every street / I get to pulls the ground away/ From underneath my feet"¹. Besieged by a sense of imagined/real homelessness, her poems evoke places she could embrace without qualms. Although the poem 'Tongue' is all about holding one's tongue, saying the right things, and probably in the right language it ingeniously ties up spatiality and hence belonging with compliance. Going back to her theme of speaking in many languages that had made her feel alienated, she once again reminisces about her tryst with her multilingual, gendered identity. Her tongue has only done her a disservice; it has made her speak when not asked to.

The poems engage in dialogues between her hybrid selves positioned at the intersection of religion, gender, and nation. The spheres of social interaction and intersection that diaspora

unbottles have to do both with the residential place as well as that where migration has occurred. Assertions of identity with regard to these varied locations often structure themselves not only around collective mobilization but also around notions about home and abroad. Diaspora is characterized by the several political, social, economic, and cultural interactions that happen over time and space between various institutionalized spaces. To belong or not to belong or even to belong in a specific way or not are questions that the diaspora engages with. The nation is a foil against which we attempt to conceptualize the notions of "diasporic consciousness" "multivocality" and "deterritorialization"². Each of these attempts tends to unpack or unsettle the problems of belonging or not belonging at all. Dharker engages belongingness as a protean phenomenon, elusively problematic as well as subject to rigorous scrutiny when she rues; "What can I do with this passport/ anyway? It's just a means/ to travel back and forth..."¹. She addresses "homesickness" in the poem 'Crab-apples' when her mother mixes memory with desire to reinvigorate the past with the present by pounding crab-apples from the Glasgow apple trees with chillis. Her "fingers ... turn into forks" signalling the transitions – at times unwilling at times unforeseen - that diasporic identities undergo. She alerts the readers to the adaptations she incorporates in everyday life in the form of "daily displacements"¹.

In 'They'll say, "She must be from another country"' she explores the socially constructed notion of otherness and alterity with clinical precision. The poem manifests the ways in which religion is an indispensable component of socio-cultural determinants. It is both an institutional and personal reflection as it looms large in outlining and overestimating identitarian politics. When she cannot come to terms with attacks on artistic autonomy or when she asks too many questions, an outsider is what she is conveniently labelled as: "When I can't comprehend / Why they're burning books / Or slashing paintings / When they can't bear to look / At god's own nakedness/When they ban the film / And gut the seats to stop the play / And I ask why / They just smile and say / "She must be / From another country"¹. To subscribe in silence is a caveat to finding a country she can call her own.

The trials and tribulations of shuttling past borders take a toll on the speaker while she is on an exacting, perpetually stretched journey. As she jostles through an ever-elusive present her eyes "lock on empty spaces"¹ in the poem 'Umbrella'. When she finally arrives and produces her boarding pass she has forgotten where she wanted to go. The crippled umbrella stands for a crippled self, a self that is floating and fluctuating in oblivion.

Nation and Religion

Nationality, gender and religion are entangled in Dharker's poems, often in irresolvable knots. The moment she tries to disentangle them she finds herself poised precariously. The poems attempt to negotiate all three, at times assertively and at

times resignedly. As a Muslim-diasporic-woman-poet it is inevitable that the political/personal, and the public/private spaces intersperse, intersect and interact in her poems. Religion for Dharker is an (in) escapable reference point she hopes to transgress. In 'Not a muslim burial' her desire to sidestep the rigidly defining boundaries of her national and religious affiliations comes forth in a nonchalant vein when she says; "Scatter them in some country/I have never visited/... Let them label the remains/ Lost Property"¹.

In 'Being good in Glasgow' the speaker Farida is an abiding Muslim by all acceptable standards. She reads the Koran five times at the seamen's club that masqueraded as a mosque on Sundays. During her attempts to remain loyal to her religion, she realizes that it was merely a façade she was penitently holding on to. It was only a matter of time before she would cast off the religious masks and "let the devil in"¹. As a hybridized individual, the speaker knows that the idea of a prelapsarian, god-fearing individual is a misnomer. When songs make more sense than holy books the fixed markers of religious identity transcend the conventional ones¹. It is in these 'interstices', the ones Bhabha³ refers to - that the overlapping, displacement, and rewriting of cultural, ethnic, and geographical 'purity' occur. Dharker dredges these intersections that give way to a distinctive cultural and religious singularity (she is critical of) as well as a syncretism, a mish-mash of beliefs that unfold a rich plethora of possibilities.

The diaspora and post 9/11

Ken Booth and Tim Donne⁴ examine the amplified historicity of some specific dates and specific months. 9/11 universally came to be associated with a world crisis that would be permanently etched in history. With the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the twentieth-century signposts of world affairs shifted from Sarajevo, Munich, Suez, Cuba, Vietnam, and the rest. It is as if everyone instantly understood that the meanings of these 'events' were global, beyond locality, an out-of-geography experience. September 11 was a place everyone shared because there was a sense that what we were witnessing, literally, was a collision of worlds.

New post-9/11 life cartographies emerged as they began to attach emotions, memories, and feelings to a specific place/city and transform it into their unique individual space. New York and London after 9/11 became the ultimate stages for storytelling; they are filled with stories told by different voices that are all rooted, inspired by, and centered on one of the cities. Hence these cities can be "read" as literary text, especially as a work of fiction with its plurality of perspectives and layered meanings. It also construes the new urban Other whose presence emerged after 9/11 and affected social changes in the metropolitan and literary environment⁵.

Home is no longer associated with separateness from the world outside or with privacy; characters of the modern urban creative

space often perceive the city as their home and feel most comfortable when immersed in it. Post 9/11 the border between private and public blurs and "home" itself becomes a subject of redefinition; it is "no longer a haven, no longer clearly demarcated"² and in the urban reality of home everybody is always exposed to the sight of a stranger; in other words, in a city, everybody is somebody else's stranger. Dharker says this as she experiences the gradually widening chasm between experiencing spaces over a period of time in the poem 'Announcing the departure': "Every new city, every street / I get to pulls the ground away/from underneath my feet"¹.

Multiculturalism and the presence of new "otherness" as well as a redefinition of public and private space characterize the postmodern metropolis and require new cultural responses and approaches. 9/11 led to a certain reconstruction of this postmodern otherness and again requires a redefinition of urban spaces and notions⁶. That this collection was published a few months into the 9/11 attacks at the World Trade Centre accords it extra relevance post the fear-driven crackdowns, extra-legal confinements, detentions, bombing incursions, and imperial occupations, a veritable case of 'perpetual war for perpetual peace'. With the policing of borders and boundaries having gained a feverish pitch, diasporic activities suddenly came under grim scrutiny and hence became seriously restricted. A once applauded hybrid creativity paled in the face of a hostile neo-liberal conservatism.

The poems negotiate the thick and nuanced junctures between conflicted spaces (self/other, private/public, personal/political) as the sullied dynamics of institutionalized racism find themselves under the scanner. 9/11 brought into fresh focus a revision of – as a sign of protest as well as insouciance – the cultural, social, religious and political dynamics of identity. It sparked debates about the temporal and spatial rupture that individuals with specific religious and ethnic identities experienced.

Gender: The gender lens stands as a significant tool in analysing the complex ways in which 'religion' influences our lives. While the first two sections of the collection navigate the challenging realms of identity situated at the fault lines between 'self' and 'other', the third section appositely called 'I Speak for the Devil' is a tongue-in-cheek reflection on how women's identities are extrinsic to who they are. They are constructed as and how they fit in or refuse to fit in according to the demands of socially prescribed norms. While religion on the one hand determines the roles accorded to women it is patriarchy that finally validates their voice, in case - if at all - they end up finding one. The devil ascribes the power to dissent, to be the force that the woman could never aspire toward in socially approved contexts. Dharker celebrates these women as she also tries to portray them as anomalies who evoke subservient fear in the onlookers. The first poem in this section 'The djinn in Auntie' foregrounds and necessitates the need for invoking the rebellious streak in women. It is the djinn or a supernatural aid

that arrived as the much-awaited antidote to the silence she had internalized over the years. To be possessed is to be set free, to be able to speak and to travel to unknown lands without restraints and inhibitions. Even the docile Anita never spoke back to her mother-in-law, but she did when the devil insisted.

The ability to discover the inner self is also the ability to attain an inextinguishable source of power, the power that intimidates society. The speaker comes to terms with this alternative self, the very identity that empowers her to laugh, scream and sing and also to close her mouth “to keep the freedom in”. In ‘All of us’ Dharker includes women from different social, cultural, and religious backgrounds bringing in a diverse set of female voices representing a collaborative sisterhood; a fitting response to the oppressive patriarchal structures. Rehmat Ali’s wife, Raju’s mother, Ayub Khan’s auntie, Mala, Naseem, Mary, Anita, Sarah, Fatima, Dhamyanti all are in control of the devil as they sing in unison. In the next poem ‘Breeding ground, Chicago’ Christine masters the art of camouflaging the devil, the “stink of evil” that lurks “right inside” her pride. This woman like Faustus has unapologetically sold her soul to the devil inscribing in the process female selfhood outside power relations. This is Dharker’s way of questioning - while reinscribing in the process - the oppressed, essentialized representation of South Asian Muslim women, a stereotype perpetuated through historical and contemporary discourses.

The poems disrupt the conventional paradigms of motherhood through an alternative image of a woman expecting a child or the ‘devil’. Instead of glorifying motherhood as a passive recipient of social respectability, Dharker reimagines a mother as the ultimate rebel, someone who capitalizes on motherhood to speak her mind. In the Indian context ‘motherland’, as imagined in the anti-colonial parlance, strategically conflates the idea of nation and motherhood, a political entity that is conveniently subsumed within the highly masculinized narrative of nationalism⁷.

Reimagining Space

May be there is a country/ where all of us live,
All of us freaks/ Who aren’t able to give
Our loyalty to fat old fools¹

In ‘Possession’¹ the devil is a territory that induces a false sense of security. It makes one believe that one can either belong by subscribing to a set system of belief (“The devil ...happy when you worship at its mirrors”) or violently transgress politically prescribed spaces to claim territories: “This ground must be mine./ Pakistan, India, Kashmir.” Dharker problematizes the spatial dynamics of living in a world that is constantly reconfiguring power relations between space and citizenship. The devil is the metaphor for the hidden desire to possess, or the unbridled invasive impulse to claim forbidden territories. This devil is also an embodiment of unrestrained spaces, unfettered by boundaries and borders. Reimagining space as a protean entity Dharker endows it with transformative powers. It reminds

us of Adrienne Rich⁸ (motivated by her work with African American and Caribbean women writers and cultural critics) who had strongly felt the urge to rethink the relation between gender and the ethnic locations of the female body. Rich stresses the need to take into account the ramifications and differences that the interface, of the body and the body politic of the nation engender⁹. In a similar vein, Caren Kaplan¹⁰ stresses the historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations.

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*¹¹ establishes links between gender and external/public space when she states how the repeated performance of gender reinforces fixed gender categories. Theda Wrede in her article “Theorizing Space and Gender in the 21st Century” while referring to this performative front of gender states: “When the body publicly enunciates the social relationship of a certain time and place, the space in which the articulation occurs becomes the site of cultural inscription.”¹² Foucault’s heterotopias¹³ or “other space” contest social hierarchies, by asserting the value of difference. Soja¹⁴ the postmodern urban planner and geographer revisits Lefebvre’s theory¹⁵ of spatiality in his books *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) and *Thirdspace* (1996). His idea of the Thirdspace questions concepts of homogeneity, equality, and permanence by the potential remapping of cultural spaces, the voicing of alterity, and the promotion of multiplicity. Hence it celebrates difference, contradiction, and change. Dharker deploys an acute understanding of space (while endorsing an imaginative parallel) through references to cities across continents; Lahore, Glasgow, Chicago, Bradford, Miami, New York, and many more. These cities become veritable meeting grounds for apparently discordant religious ethos as the “seaman’s club” unabashedly masquerades as a “mosque on Sundays”. ‘Being good in Glasgow’ explores the plurality of the city space, a space that cannot be limited to a singular perspective. Even the park (Prayer in the park) becomes the Promised Land for breaking conventions, a place that gives them the freedom to frolic with “their socks off/and skirts up, shirtless”¹.

Conclusion

In the last poem ‘Exorcism’ the devil is exorcised when the speaker defiantly rebuffs him. Refusing to conform – as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother - the speaker traverses across cities that have been historically inscribed in the memories of Pakistan, India, Britain, Scotland, and Rome. These alternative spaces are redemptive as they redefine gender categories and let the woman/devil speak in hitherto unforeseen tongues – “dancing on cans/and champagne bottles rolling / round the street, ...”¹ and plotting “new geography”¹.

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