



The Exiled Body in Imtiaz Dharker's *Purdah and Other Poems* (1989)

Reda A. Shehata

Abstract:

This paper places the postcolonial feminist critic Ketu H. Katrak's theory of "exile"—especially its internal form—in dialogue with *Purdah and Other Poems* (1989) by the British poet of Pakistani origin Imtiaz Dharker. It examines Dharker's representation of the female's body as exiled because of indigenous patriarchal and religious traditions, showing how the power of those traditions seeps into the body's very heart, creating oppressive and stifling states of being. It demonstrates how in areas such as dress, belief, marriage, and child upbringing woman is faced with two options, either obey the traditions regulating those areas or step out of the boundaries and face an internal exile, a sense of not belonging to herself and the community around her. Dharker, who was born into a Muslim family, criticizes those traditions as they work to subjugate Muslim women in India (or even in the diaspora). The females, whose experiences she writes about, try to escape the trap of tradition—either in its religious or patriarchal form—that primarily defines them in degrading terms. Sometimes they succeed, but oftentimes they fail and further social exclusion and un-belonging result. And their struggle is well articulated in the mainstream English poetic tradition in terms of words, sounds, images, and stanza patterns.

Key words: exile-body- tradition-purdah.

Depending upon various literary and non-literary texts and the history and culture from which they emerged, the postcolonial feminist critic Ketu H. Katrak theorizes "exile" as a concept to describe the condition of the female body in the works of many postcolonial female writers from South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. She argues that those writers' works depict the female body in an apparent "state of exile" that includes "self-exile and self-censorship, outsidersness, and un-belonging to itself" within indigenous patriarchal and religious traditions, "strengthened by British racialized colonial practices" in those regions. That "state of exile" may be "external," due to "migration and geographical relocations forced by political persecution, material conditions of poverty, and forms of intellectual silencing" in their home countries¹. And it may be "internal" (2) because of breaking tradition—either in its patriarchal or religious form.

Although Katrak discusses both British colonial and local traditions demonstrating how the former interrupted the latter complicating the "fragile balance" of power between men and women in pre-colonial times, the theoretical focus of this paper will be on the latter as it persists in postcolonial times. As a fixed entity, local tradition designates for woman certain roles in patriarchy and becomes crucially important for her body when it has "the weight of scriptural" authority." It especially designates an "objectification and definition" of her "as "daughter, wife, mother, grandmother, and mother" (9) and enforces on her certain sets of beliefs and codes of dress and behavior. And whatever her engagement with it—in terms of "speaking against, being complicit within, or resisting" it by using her body "via speech, silence, starvation, or illness though she sometimes fails" and fatal consequences result in murder or suicide" — it causes her to "experience self-exile, a sense of not belonging"(158) to herself, particularly to her body that feels disconnected from itself. This is because in her negotiation with tradition, she faces "no-win situations: obey the dominant code and survive, even if that entails serious self-censorship; or disobey tradition, step outside the boundaries, and pay the ultimate price" (160)—landing in that internal exile and be excluded from the larger community.

Tradition is then gender biased because some of its elements such as "religious belief, education, dress codes, freedom of movement are enforced very differently on males versus females. A struggle over tradition is a struggle over the female body—how to control and keep it familiar within recognizable and legitimized patriarchal [and religious] codes" (159). As forms of power, native patriarchal and religious traditions colluded with colonial practices to add to woman's domination and internal exile. Foucault's analysis of power is relevant to an analysis of the internal exile of woman's body. Describing how power operates, he speaks about the "extent" it "seeps into the very grains of individuals, reaches right into their

bodies, permeates their gestures, their postures, what they say, how they learn to live, and work with other people" (qtd. in Sheridan 217). The power of tradition penetrates into the heart of woman's life, operating to control her body through institutional apparatuses such as families and schools in addition to religious, legal, and medical practices. And she turns to be an emblem or a repository of it as it informs her life from birth to death (a notion that many contemporary feminists from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean try to challenge). Rather than a "subject" or "an object" (194), she is conceived as an arena where it unfolds, and her body becomes a site in which it is contested, accepted, or rejected. She tries to confront it by working within the boundaries of patriarchal and religious structures either in obedient or defiant ways. And she has to mediate "physically among categories" of belonging to her body, to her desired sexuality, and to "traditional norms," or "opting out of conforming" (Katrak 158) and thus experiences a state of exile from herself and from her community

This paper argues that Katrak's concept of the exiled body, especially its internal form, can be placed in dialogue with Imtiaz Dharker's volume *Purdah and Other Poems* (1989)—though Katrak never applied her concept to poetry. Winner of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2014, Imtiaz Dharker (b.1954), who is of Pakistani origins, was raised in Glasgow, and now divides her time between London and Mumbai. She is a poet, an artist, and a documentary film-maker. As a poet, she has published six volumes of poetry to date: *Purdah and other Poems* (1989), *Postcards from God* (1997); *I speak for the Devil* (2001); *The Terrorist at my Table* (2006); *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009) and *Over the Moon* (2014)². In an Indian context, some consider her a "major" voice who "brought a sense of political commitment to Indian poetry" (Choudhury 173). Dowson and Entwistle place her in a British context—in terms of association rather than nationality—arguing that by grouping her according to a "racial identity" with South Asian poets such as Sujata Bhatt (b.1956), Debjani Chatterjee (b.1952), Eunice de Souza (1940-2017)—and many others—is to ignore the "postcolonial feminist" aspect of her poetry—which, according to Papke, clearly figures in issues such as "language, identity, and race" as well "gender oppression" (52)³ and the weight of tradition. Some else view her as a global poet, who, although writing about "geographical and cultural displacement, conflict and gender politics, while also interrogating received ideas about home, freedom, and religion," speaks plainly and with "great emotional intelligence to anyone who has ever felt adrift in the increasingly complex, multicultural and shrinking world we inhabit" (Anonymous n.p.).

Using Katrak's concept of the internally exiled body, this paper tries to examine how Dharker's volume presents the female's body as exiled because of indigenous patriarchal and religious practices, how the power of those practices seeps into the body's very heart, creating oppressive and

stifling states of being. It attempts to demonstrate how in areas such as dress, belief, marriage, and child upbringing woman is faced with two options, either obey the traditions regulating her life in those areas or step out of the boundaries and face an internal exile, a sense of not belonging to herself and the community around her. Exploring "the veiled subject and the boundaries between inside and outside" (Procter n.p.), the paper attempts to reveal how the subject struggles against unjust patriarchal and religious practices—such as preventing woman from satisfying the desires of her heart, denying her access to the places of worship because of her gender, and her servitude in marriage etc. It also tries to demonstrate how Dharker makes the strategic choice of speech, opting for a verbal defiance of patriarchal and scriptural authority dictated by tradition. To borrow the words of the feminist theorist Susan Stanford Freidman, Dharker appears like Penelope who "exercises her agency as a weaver/ writer within and against a patriarchal tradition" (2).

Generally speaking, Dharker's poetry is characterized by "a very specific, and tightly-wrought Muslim sensibility, one that is further enhanced in strength by her individual point of view, indeed any woman's point of view" (Sen 276). She writes extensively about "identity and belonging; she reflects a universalism as well as strong feminist consciousness in protest poems about the veil and gender role" (Shamsie 154). The protest poems about the veil are foregrounded in the volume under examination. The volume starts with "the seductive image of the veil" and proceeds to examine "the complex ideas associated with it" (Dharker, *sheer poetry* n.p.). Although for Muslim woman it is a symbol of "cultural and religious identity"⁴ (Young 80), a vision of her "womanhood and piety, a vehicle for resistance" (El Guindy xvi, xiii), there are those in the west who see the veil as a sign of woman's oppression and backwardness. From a western point of view it is judged as a "symbol of both the oppression of women...and the backwardness of Islam," and it has become "the open target of the west's attack and the "spearhead of assault on Muslim societies" (Ahmed 152). In it the westerners see Muslim woman as imprisoned, "literally confined, caged, exhibiting every quality that many western women and men" have considered" that she needs "freeing from by the enlightened, unveiled west—the undressed west, which demands" that she uncovers herself (Young 83) willingly or unwillingly. Today a veiled woman is looked at by the west as "'other' indicating western woman's superiority" (Bulbeck 30) although the same west has viewed the veiled Victorian woman as civilized. To justify their presence, Colonial governments in Muslim countries always urged Muslim women to unveil in order to be "liberated and civilized" (Freedman 83-84). Dharker neither totally adopts the Euro-centric view of the purdah nor does she wholly

approve of it, especially when it is enforced in the name of religion. She does not object to its being worn willingly as a symbol of Muslim woman's religious identity. She objects to it when it is enforced and the body becomes figuratively veiled, when it becomes "purdah of the mind." when in it Muslim women are denied their rights to think as independent human beings, rather than inferior to men. Specifically, she is critical of the link always made between it and senses of shame and sin. She is against society when, in the name of tradition, it links it with "shame to repress female sexuality and the independence of the spirit which is part of it" (King 322), thus controlling women's lives and pushing them to "falseness, ambiguity, distrust, and isolation" (Papke 81). Dharker describes the traditional woman's clothes as suggestive both of seduction and as an instrument of "power used to bring women's to their heel in the name of religion" (qtd. in Astley 41).

The first poem of the volume "Purdah 1" examines the sensibility of a young Muslim girl reaching the age of puberty in relation to veil. In the process, it becomes a protest against veil not because it is willingly worn as a symbol of religious identity but because it is enforced on the young girl, causing her to "retreat behind / the borderline of skin" ("Battle-line" 46-49) in order to be "safe from disapproval and harm" (King 321) of society, a retreat that leaves her bereft of a true sense of her self. The poem displays some of the technical aspects of Dharker's poetry, apparently written in the mainstream tradition of English poetry, which King lists as preference for "cadence, the sounds of words, and rhyme. Although she appears to write free verse, her lines are rhythmic, and despite differing lengths often have a strong iambic feel" (321)—to these can be added what Dharker herself calls the "power" of words to "give birth to a whole nest / of hungry thoughts" ("The Word" 58). The poem has seven stanzas of varying line numbers and lengths—the first stanza consists of three lines while the rest range between five to eight lines, mostly iambic. There are many words that are linked by sound such as "kind," "find," "skin," "in," and "came" and "shame" etc. Structurally, the poem alternates between a narrative string, direct statement, and commentary. In first stanza, for example, "One day" and the use of the third-person pronoun initiate the narrative string of the poem, which reveals that the decision to wear purdah is not the girl's. It is decided by society whose tradition dictates that on reaching puberty, that comes "quite naturally," she should start to "learn some shame." From an Islamic point of view, shame necessitates concealment as the Qur'anic verse explains: O Children of Adam! We have revealed unto you raiment to conceal your shame..." (7:26). Shame is then related to gender and sexuality, which are strictly watched out by society, and, therefore, the girl has to do what it is expected from her regardless of what she herself feels.

Once the world starts to see her as a mature person, once it starts to see her as an object, the girl's response should be veiling.

Although society views purdah as a "kind of safety," it is, ironically, the safety of death as the following image suggests:

The cloth fans out against the skin
much like the earth that falls
on coffin after they put the dead men in. (3)

Dharker replaces the narrative string of the first stanza with a commentary rendered in a number of descriptive utterances in the next three stanzas. The utterance above, for example, contains a highly evocative simile: purdah safely covers the body just as the earth covers the dead person, separating the latter from the experiences of the real world. The connection between purdah and coffin shows "the deadening impact" of this custom on the soul of the girl who appears to be "meted out a burial treatment while very much alive" (Pandey 55). Because it is enforced, it becomes a reflection of "an overarching system of patriarchal control and dominance which shroud women within 'the purdah of the mind'" (Chakraborty 78), and threaten their sense of self. In it, the body seems to be stifled because the girl hides herself from the eyes of the onlookers who "make different angles / in the light, their eyes aslant, / a little sly" (3), an image suggesting society's violation of the privacy of her body as well its hypocrisy because while it pretends to be protecting virtue, that society is in fact spying on its members. Although she wears purdah as a garment for safety, she is not immune from the preying eyes of men. And although she wears it in conformity with that society's tradition, she is not safe from its members' intrusion into her secret life. The girl has to hide from the preying eyes of men because, to quote Rama Nair, she is seen as "inferior, as a temptress, the very sight of whom is sinful and distracting" to them (qtd. in Guleria 281). She is looked upon in terms of her body that needs to be covered. And in time she will no longer know those around her, and they will no longer know her behind her covering, the beginning then of her internal exile. And her exiled body becomes the site where society's inconsistent attitude toward her is contested.

In that setting, the young girl is taught to be ashamed of her body and, therefore, to accept it as a sin. The sense of "shame" she starts to realize on reaching puberty is reinforced by this other "sense of sin" which she carries "between the thighs," a sense of sin she is not responsible for, but which she is forced to accept psychologically. This sense of sin is a strong manifestation of a "body-culture and its degrading fleshly enterprise" that "inflicts a guilty conscience" (Pandey 54-55) in the female whose original ancestor (Eve) is deemed responsible for the Fall of Adam according to monotheistic religions. The connection made between "shame" and "sin"

discloses that patriarchal society views woman as a source of seduction, as a sex-object, being there only to serve the needs of man. That society hammers these two senses into the mind of every Muslim girl once she matures in order to teach her some manners.

If the fourth stanza starts with the third person pronoun "she" that soon links the girl's with "someone else's life," someone who may have a similar experience, the fifth returns to the narrative string using the first person pronoun "we" to mark the shift from one individual's experience to a collective one. So in addition to the one specific girl she is observing, Dharker speaks about other unnamed females to whose skin the external covering grows closer, narrowing the space available for them and augmenting their internal exile. While that piece of cloth comes closer to their skin, shrouding them in darkness, certain "light" filters through "their bodies"—it may be the light of freedom from that oppressive custom—and certain "voices" speak inside them— which may be the voices of rebellion and resistance. However, they remain secluded behind their bodies' walls—symbols of a repressive patriarchal tradition.

The sixth stanza returns to the particular experience of the speaker—though in her experience the experience of like-minded females cannot be mistaken. Although she seems to be remembering the first time she was forced to wear purdah, she uses the present tense to reflect the continuous impact of that experience. "She stands outside herself" with a perception of a disassembled body scattered among "the four corners of a room" that seems to enclose her. She distances herself from her personality to develop her own particular point of view of purdah. She stands separate from her body, but "wherever she goes, she is always inching past herself, / as if she were a clod of earth"(4) — an image which recalls the earlier image of the earth as a swallowing womb fully enclosing the body. She inches past herself because she is confronted with her body, with her distinctive biological make-up. She thinks about her roots (as a South Asian), trying to scratch "for a hold" between the first rib (of Adam) and the second rib (of Eve), struggling to break free from her internal exile, but she cannot. This is because she constantly passes out of her hands to be defined by someone else—often any male member of the family who, according to the patriarchal structure, can provide her with protection. Meanwhile the doors keep opening inward, and she goes deeper and deeper into herself as the way outward remains closed. This constant descent leads to her seclusion and isolation from the outside world, and she leans on her body that is still enclosed within those traditions. The space left for her to move in is limited, and her vision of the world is restricted. The repetition of "inward" indicates that "the enforced use of purdah can often be a deadly blow to [her] sense of self which seems to wither under the burden" (Chakraborty 78) of it as it leaves her no choice and causes her to be engulfed in her body. It proves to

be less defensive in the face of the preying eyes of men, and it remains as a weight. Additionally, veiling is the beginning of her seclusion because in an Indian context tradition has established a link between veiling and the seclusion of young girls reaching the age of puberty. This seclusion can be accounted for by "reference to the twin notions of honor and shame, notions which are more widely applicable than Islamic ideals. Women are the locus of the family's 'honor,' and their vulnerability by assault by outside men necessitates constant vigilance over their virtue" (Jeffrey 23).

The poem then makes it clear that veil is a mechanism "legitimized by patriarchally mandated religious custom" (Katrak 163) to control and subjugate females like her. As a "religious sanction and prescription," it proves to be "devastating" to her "personality and psyche" (Bhushan 6). Other aspects of veil are dealt with in "Purdah 11," a poem which displays that the fate of a veiled Muslim girl is again dictated by the same religious custom. In the process, it criticizes other things related to it such hypocrisy behind some religious behaviors, the practice of dowry that make Muslim girls a marketable commodity, and the ability of the Muslim girl in patriarchal society to respond freely to the desires of the heart without being censured. Along with the experience of the speaker, Dharker introduces the experiences of other two females, Saleema and Naseem, to disclose what the female body is subjected to under the weight of purdah. These women try to break cover, but they are faced with the wrath of their community. Because they live in an alien land, they are doubly exiled: first, because of the oppressive forces of patriarchy legitimized by religion and second, because of the unfair atmosphere of diaspora—though the emphasis remains mainly on the former.

Articulating the three experiences in seven sections, the poem is dramatic in structure and is written in free verse in mostly iambic lines: "Your mind throws black shadows / on marble cooled by centuries of dead" (5). Mainly, the poem alternates between the use of the second person pronoun, which introduces a narrative string, and the second person pronoun which, without being mistaken, refers back to the speaker herself. In this way, the speaker is able to maintain some distance between her experience and the experiences of other females she recounts, thus being able to have a particular view of those experiences. The first section dramatizes the speaker's experience inside a mosque in a "foreign land," an experience that reflects a comfortable spiritual atmosphere. The call for prayer rises while she watches a "familiar script" (of verses) of the holy Qur'an" decorating the wall. She browses over the pages of the holy book, and in the "tin box" of her memory "a coin of comfort rattles" in that foreign land. This image suggests that the holy book still occupies a significant space in her life in spite of the criticism directed against the traditional way of reciting it—the

memory of which is triggered by the scene in front of her. She remembers an old Maulvi who nudged the words of that book into her heads, "words unsoiled by sense, / pure rhythm on the tongue" (5). The recitation was mechanical, done without understanding the meaning of words. Such stock responses that were devoid of any spiritual concern were part of Dharker's culture in which she was "rapped" on her "knuckles" or hit on her "head" by the Maulvi in case she "got the words wrong. [She] didn't understand a word as it was in Arabic" and "the point was in rhythm" ("Interview with Eunice de Souza" 112). However, the response of the speaker's body to the current reciting, along with that of the "twenty other" women, was one of comfort as it "was lulled / into thinking it had found a home" (5). Home is no longer the place she left, nor is it the place she now lives in, but the space nourished by the spiritual ease caused by that reciting.

The poem progresses in the second section to bring to light the hypocrisy of a new Muslim Hajji. At fifteen, he was attractive because he was knowledgeable, had pink cheeks, and blue eyes. He slyly dropped a flower on the speaker's book and made a sensual look at her. There was nothing holy in his outlook, he who had just returned from holy Mecca. Her response was both romantic and sensual: she dreamt of him for days, made "pilgrimages to his cheeks," and her tiny "breasts grew an inch." The physical and psychological changes the incident incurred in her were immense, and she was not afraid of retribution on the Day of Judgment. Such recollections are interrupted by the call for prayer heard again though both time and place had changed. Evelyn, the medium girl from Brighton, observed that the speaker was still wearing the bright clothes that her dead mother bought her—an indication that she has not completely disengaged her self from her and, eventually, would probably get a traditional marriage like her.

After that personal observation the speaker moves to section three to record some collective experiences through which she criticizes marriage in patriarchal Islamic society. She is specifically critical of the practice of *mehar*—money given to the bride as an assurance against divorce—because it indicates that a woman is "less worthy than a man" (Katrak 10)⁵, and is, therefore, paid to make up the difference. It makes the girl a marketable commodity:

They have all been sold and bought,
the girls I knew,
unwilling virgins who had been taught,
especially in this stranger's land, to bind
their brightness tightly round,
whatever they might wear,
in the purdah of the mind. (7)

The contrast between "sold" and "bought," the rhyming of "bought" and "taught," "bind" and "mind," and the repetition of the long vowel "i" in "bind," "tightly," and "mind" in mostly iambic lines reveal how helpless those "unwilling virgins" are before a religiously sanctioned custom. Even in a foreign land, religion and patriarchy collude to turn them into a commodity in the marriage-market. In the name of some misused Islamic practices they are sexually exploited even in marriage because those practices give man unquestioned authority in that institution: he can marry more than one woman (depending on the money he pays as a dowry) and has the right to divorce. And in that case woman becomes a commodity to be sold and bought against her will. Though viewed as "slaves and commodities," still they suffer the "worst effect" on their "spirit," and they realize "the falseness" between what they "feel and what they are allowed to show, the distance between them and their social selves" (King 322). As "unwilling virgins," they had taught by dead men—called elsewhere the "watchdogs of virtue"—to wear veil which had become not only a concealing garment—for which there is nothing wrong with as long as it remains an expression of their religious identity— but also as a "purdah of the mind"—and this is what is wrong with it as it becomes deadening and stifling to their personalities. Additionally, they had been taught to observe strict religious norms by veiling their "eyes / with heavy lids" and hiding their "breasts / but not the fullness of their lips" (7). And in those alien territories they still carry with them their teachings about "honor" and "purity," two conventions—linked to female sexuality—which are regulated by patriarchal codes (the only positive thing about those codes is that they had become protective against the "mean temptations" of "alien hands," and now those "unwilling virgins" are convinced that their customs are better than those of the alien territory). They had learnt too that God is justice because He saved the child (Ismael, son of Abraham) by sacrificing the lamb. But justice could be sometimes dreading because they have been, ironically, educated to hide their head when "God comes."

The speaker identifies herself in the experiences of these women, "There are so many of me" (8), because she seems quite familiar with their "past and future," their behavior, their whereabouts, and even their accent. She is also aware of the oppression they are subjected to because of religious sanctions. And she wants them to resist their internal exile by breaking cover that had reduced them to "ghosts." She muses:

We'll blindfold the spies. Tell me
what you did when the new moon
sliced you out of purdah,
your body shimmering through the lies. (9)

She encourages them not to be afraid of those "spies" who intrude into the privacy of their bodies, those who see woman as body to be spied on, those who view her as a sex object. She wants to know how they felt when the new moon penetrated behind purdah, shimmering their bodies through "the lies" that society propagates about them. This curiosity intends to discard "the spell of a ghostly death-in-life existence" and replace it with "a full-blooded one where one may bathe one's body in the light of the new moon and respond to the desire of the heart without fear or shame" (Chakraporty 80). But will they succeed to respond courageously to the "desire" of their hearts without retribution from society? The answer to this question unfolds in the story of the two young girls Saleema and Naseem.

Although her first love was an English man, Saleema was forced to marry within her community. She had a "swan neck" and "tragic eyes." Innocent, she has known from "films that the heroine was always pure, / and untouched" (9). However, she answered to her instinctual urges by conceding to a "mad old artist"—the sexual metaphor in she "poured out her breasts to fill [his] cup" suggests this—and rejoiced in her "wickedness." The consequence was terrible: she was "[b]ought and sold, and worse, / grown old" (9). She has been reduced to a reproductive unit because of the tradition of dowry. Losing her youth and womanhood, she married in her community and had annual pregnancies. Even in marriage her body becomes prostituted. She rebelled at last, but she, ironically, married for another time, returning to the same pattern of life. And in humiliation, she begged "approval from the rest" and has become "watchful as any creature / that lifts its head and sniffs the air / only to scent its own small trail of blood" (10)—an image suggesting utter frustration. All these marriages have drained life from her, and she finally retreats into an internal exile—from her self and from those around her.

The narrative string used to introduce the story of Saleema is replaced by the speaker's direct address to Naseem. Naseem's story also displays tension again between a freedom-seeking female and her conservative society. She wants freedom, but in the name of honor, her society oppresses her. Her elopement with a man outside her faith brings shock to the family: her tear-stained mother is burned with shame, her aunts gossip, and

The table is laden at Mohrram
and you are remembered
among the dead. Not going back.
The prayer's said. (10).

She has strayed "from the approved track" ("Going Home" 23-27) that religious custom has set for her, and, by implication, she is named a whore and is, therefore "rendered an outsider to her culture" because she broke its "coded structures of morality and behavior" (Katrak9-10).

Excommunication is the consequence of her disgraceful behavior. Her loose morality brings her both physical and psychological punishment. By eloping with her English boy, she thinks that she will be free. But she discovers that she has replaced one "master" with another, to quote De Beauvoir (352):

And there you are with your English boy
who was going to set you free,
trying to smile and be accepted,
always on your knees. (10)

She is not free then and is more and more exiled as she is "always on her knees." Her "rebellion against her inherited faith offers her no solace and she has to dance all the time to the tunes of her English husband trying to smile and be accepted" (Pandey 57). Her dream of freedom has become an illusion as she ran away from her community's oppressive conventions to humiliation at the hands of her English mate.

In spite of the failed stories of these young girls, Dharker moves at the end of the poem to a direct speech to woman anywhere inciting her to seek freedom whether she is

In or out of purdah. Tied, or bound.
Shaking your box to hear
how freedom rattles[...]
one coin, one sound. (10)

The image of "one coin" with "one sound" is suggestive of how unique and precious freedom is. Therefore, she wants all women to shake their box, to resist their prison, and rebel against their patriarchal society—in short to resist their internal exile both from themselves and their community.

Along with that call, Dharker continues to criticize other misguided Islamic practices which stifle woman and cause her to live a state of unbelonging. The previous poem starts with the rise of the call for prayer while the speaker browses over the pages of the holy Qur'an. She listens to a "coin of comfort in the mosque" that clatters down the years of loss," and then proceeds to contrast that purity of faith with wrong religious practices. The same strategy is repeated in "Grace" (11-12) where she attacks preventing woman from participating in religious rituals because of her biology. The poem sets in contrast the purity of faith that the speaker feels while at the Masjid (mosque) against the "drought" of faith that the vulgar behavior of guardians of virtue can bring about. The poem is written in free-verse that imitates the flow of the speaker's thoughts: it consists of six sections of varying line lengths –the first being the longest as it sets the stage for the rest of her thoughts by describing what the "masjid" represents for her, and ends with a dangling line describing what "Bismillah (in the name of God) incurs in her. The poem depends also on intersexuality by

quoting translation of some Qur'anic verses and transliteration of some Arabic words such as "Masjid" and "Bismillah."

At the beginning, the speaker says that she feels "grace" while in the mosque, a feeling which, ironically, contrasts with the gracelessness of those who pretend to have religious wisdom. There, she is sure she can cherish peace, grace, and security. It is not a place like any other place, and it becomes a "patch of ground" where she can at last lay down her own name and

...take another—
a bright mantle
that will unfold itself around [her]:
God the Compassionate, the Merciful. (11)

The intertextual use of some Qur'anic verses, which reflect the boundless mercy of God, shows the speaker at the height of her spiritual ease. But she is soon upset by the senseless response of the man at the door (the Imam of the mosque). She expects wisdom from him as a humble servant of God. But he disregards her on the grounds that her gender is defiled—in reference to her menstruation. In the character of this old man, Dharker seems to be critical of discrimination exercised against women in many corners of the Islamic world. Many like him believe that a menstruating woman should not be allowed into mosque⁶. According to this mentality, she has to remain in an internal exile because of her biology. But she offsets his contempt by lashing out at him:

He rolls his reason on his tongue
and spits it out.
You know again the drought
the blazing eye of faith
can bring about. (11)

These mostly iambic lines with its monosyllable-words and occasional rhymes ("out," "drought," and "about") illustrate that this imam is pathetic at best. The speaker realizes what he and his likes stand for: drought faith. To face his senselessness, she shouts, "Allah-u-Akbar" (God the Great) to reassure herself that she rejects his own strict interpretation of faith. And to be more confident she recites: "God the Compassionate, the Merciful, / created man from clots of blood" (12). She wants to remind that man that which makes her "defiled" in his eyes is the same from which mankind was created⁷. And to reassure herself again, she utters "Bismillah" (in the name of God) that sounds so sweet on her tongue— though at first it sounded like salt And she feels her heart cleared of what might have defiled her. And despite the irony of the title—that contrasts the grace of God with the gracelessness of that man—the poem tends to move more in the direction of redeeming that half of humanity through the grace of God Himself.

So what Dharker is critical of is the attitude of those who have their own strict interpretation of the message of God. She lashes out at this man who insists on excluding her from the place of worship because of her body, because of a natural biological process she has no control of. Dharker is more daring in questioning the true value of the prayer⁸ of those who want to keep woman in an internal exile. Such a critical attitude is strongly expressed in "Prayer" (13), where the scene is set also outside a mosque. The speaker is annoyed because she is denied entry due to male discriminatory practices grounded on sex differences. She resents that discrimination by venting her anger at the worshippers themselves. She observes their "sandals" which give "a picture clearer than their faces" (13). They seem to be poor, and their "sandals," again with soles, heels, and thongs, appear to be mended many times, reflecting a "perfect pattern of a need" (13). They are piled up "like a thousand prayers / washing against the walls of God" (13). Out of anger and sheer curiosity, she questions the validity of their prayers in the following refrain, "What prayers are they whispering? //What they are whispering?" (13). The question is subtly ironical because they practice faith, but their deeds do not conform with it as they deny her entry into the place of worship because of her gender. Dharker is critical of that patriarchal practice—done in the name of religion—which favors man over woman and denies her her own rights. Because no article of faith forbids a woman from entering the mosque except in her period as she is exempt from prayer, "theirs is no worship at all which discriminates against women on sex grounds. Religion ought to teach the quality of love and inclusion but this 'prayer' smack of malice and hatred by excluding women as outcastes" (Pandey 58).

Dharker seeks to liberate women from such practices, which wrongly use religious teachings to suppress them, thus denying them any chance or possibility for developing a true self-identity. But her criticism of this religious aspect of tradition is no less strong as her criticism of its other patriarchal manifestation. She attacks patriarchy because it defines woman in terms of her "*object status*" (Mohanty 201—author's italics) and insists on exiling her internally. She is critical of such a system under which a woman is treated as "an appendage, an accessory" and is accorded "secondary importance" (Pandey 48). She objects to it because it "ordains that woman's place is the home, her role as a wife and mother is quite often synonymous with her total human existence" (Dey 9). She also stands up to it because of the verbal silence it forces on woman by showing how she (woman) must watch out if she intends to speak, her smile must be stifled by her "sari-end," and no one has to see her "serenity cracked, / Even with delight." She reveals how woman does not even have the right to scream, and if she needs to do it, she has do it "alone but in front of the mirror / where [she] can see

the strange shape the mouth makes" (A Woman's Place" 32-34) before she soon wipes it off⁹.

Many of the above thoughts about the degraded position of woman in patriarchy are also dealt with in "Another Woman" (38-39). The poem is about the plight of a wife under patriarchy, where she is shown to be unable to live her life as a normal human being as she is not allowed to express her happiness or pain. Lacking freedom, she has to remain imprisoned in fear and helplessness. Also, she is subject to utter submission and is exposed domestic abuse due to her gender inadequacy. The wife's life is only limited to the domestic sphere: doing daily chores— such as shopping and cooking—and facing the wrath of her mother-in-law and experiencing feelings of loneliness due her husband's absence. Written in free-verse, the poem has five sections of varying line-length followed by three separate lines that bring its narrative string to a conclusion in the form of a commentary.

In her mother-in-law's house the wife is reduced to a slave: every morning she comes back from the marketplace with food items to be met with her (mother-in-law's) "dark looks":

The usual words came and beat
their wings against her: the money spent,
curses heaped upon her parents,
who had sent her out
to darken other people's door. (38)

As an adjective, "usual" is indicative of the pattern of humiliation that this wife is subjected to daily. And the metaphor of wings suggests how harsh her mother-in-law's language is. At worst, she is seen by that mother as a spendthrift and a source of annoyance and therefore deserves the curses "heaped at her parents." Complicit then in oppressing this wife, this mother-in-law is typical of other Indian "mothers-in-law in patriarchy, who attain 'male' privilege with age and as mothers of sons," and who "often participate in these horrific acts" (Katrak 178). Additionally, she is always threatened by the unfair dowry system, which imprisons her for life in her husband's home without any hope for divorce.

Besides this verbal abuse, Dharker paints a bleak image of utter servitude:

She crouched, as usual, on the floor
beside the stove,
When the man came home
she did not look into his face
nor raise her head; but bent
her back a little more.
Nothing gave her the right
to speak¹⁰. (39)

The repetition of "usual" again points to the continuous pattern of oppression and submission that the woman is exposed to. She is denied her simple rights as a wife, and the use of "bent" suggests that it is not only her back that she has to bend to her husband, but her will as well. The image of the "cheap" black cooking pot is suggestive of poverty that adds to her servitude. Her married life is a grave at best:

This was the house she had been sent to,
the man she had been bound to,
the future she had been born into. (39)

Like many women in postcolonial India, she appears to be unable to step out of "the boundaries established by cultural code" of the husband as god because she will be ostracized in "overt and subtle ways" (Katrak 10). Like many others, she seems to be a victim of her parents' failing attitude as they press her to "put up with physical and emotional abuse, until sadly, she might pay the ultimate price of her life." Hers is a typical Indian marriage in patriarchy where fear of divorce and the parents' unsupportive attitude are common factors, which augment her alienation and increase her sense of not belonging to her self. By accepting her role as a wife in patriarchy, this woman proves that "traditions" that are "most oppressive to women"—such as dowry, multiple childbearing, and sati¹¹—are located within the arena of female sexuality" (ibid. 11). Like other postcolonial writers, Dharker offers a vision of "wifhood, not as it is traditionally expected to be fulfilling and nurturing but as enslaving" (ibid.159), thus alienating the wife physically from her body and causing her to suffer mentally. Although wifhood offers woman "an avenue for legitimized sexual expression," it renders this woman "powerless in terms of economic dependency and emotional subservience" (ibid. 166) to a husband under whose will she must subsume hers. Her exilic state of un-belonging within her marital home means her exile from her body. With no will to choose her marriage home, let alone a husband, this woman has no future to cherish. In her life, choices are then absent, submission is complete, and silence is unquestioned. She lives in milieu devoid of love and spiritual nourishment. And within that strict patriarchal system, she loses any sense of true selfhood, and, therefore, her life is shrouded in darkness, which is augmented by verbal abuse and forced silence. Ironically, the only "spark" blazing in the darkness of her life is the "spark" of the kerosene she throws, which changes her into "another woman" in the long list of those who are trying to break loose from the barricades of patriarchy. And the use of the collective pronoun in the last line, "We shield our faces from the heat" is indicative of the common fate that this woman shares with many others who are bound by the same patriarchal forces of oppression and subjugation.

In such a patriarchal culture, the institution of marriage becomes oppressive, killing any chance for woman to live as an independent human being with specific needs and passions. She has to abide by the rules that have been codified to regulate her life. In time those rules shape the way she carries on with the rest of her life even though she might have rebelled against them as "Choice" (40-42) illustrates. The poem questions the ability of a child in patriarchal society to follow or part ways with the parents' style of upbringing. In that society mothers do not enjoy their full rights and, therefore, have little to do to protect their daughters from the forces of patriarchy. The mother, who is the speaker of the poem, says that she does her best to raise her child away from the restrictive fetters according which she herself was raised but discovers that with age she is unable to break free from her mother's (the daughter's grandmother's) style of upbringing.

Part of the poem's free verse and mostly iambic lines, the first section uses a long sentence which is built upon parallel structures and contrasts:

I may raise my child in this man's house
or that man's love,
warm her on this one's smile, wean
her to that one's wit,
praise or blame at a chosen moment,
in a considered way, say
yes or no, true, false, tomorrow
not today [...] (40).

Now rebellious, the mother wants her child to escape her (the mother's) previous fate in patriarchy. It does not matter for her wherever and with whomever her child will be raised. What matters most to her is who the daughter will be, what kind of identity will she have "when the choices are made, /when the choosers are dead." But the adverb "helplessly" unfortunately suggests that the child's position will be precarious because she will probably be trapped by the same patriarchal forces that, to a large extent, shaped a great deal of her mother's life.

In the second section of the poem the mother urges her daughter to be ready to walk life on her own: "Trust is a habit you'll soon break." She calls upon her to prepare herself to leave her (mother's) lap, to be weaned from her "cradling arm" so that she and the mother will be safely separated from each other. She encourages her to rebel against the traditional pattern of life that patriarchal society usually imposes on women. But when the mother recounts her experience in the last section of the poem, she, ironically, reveals that she has not completely succeeded in breaking free from her mother's influence. She spent years hiding from her mother's face and through "feverish nights" dreamt of her while

...the watchdogs of virtue

and obedience crouched on my chest. "Shake
them off," I told myself, and did. Wallowed
in small perversities, celebrated as they came
of age, matured to sin. (42).

She has broken free from the oppressive fetters which "the watchdogs
of virtue / and obedience"—those wise old men of the community—codify
to control and subjugate weaker members of society like her. And she has
strutted her "independence across whole continents / of sheets"—hinting at
her diasporic experience. She has escaped her precarious position in
religious and patriarchal structures. But she blundered "in small
perversities" and experienced guilt and shame following her act of rebellion.
And a sense of incomplete victory remained with her because she
discovered that when

...turning from the grasp
of arms, the rasp of breath,
to look through darkened windows at the night,
Mother, I find you staring back at me.

When did my body agree
to wear your face? (42)

Although she has her free body, she still wears her mother's face, has
her imprint. She looks like her though she thinks she is separated from her,
she who herself has not been free from fetters of her patriarchal society. In
spite of her rebellion against her mother's pattern of life, she, however,
realizes she could not be linguistically or mentally separated from her.
Dharker seems to be suggesting that some aspects of tradition remain alive
in some corners of the individual's life in spite of attempts to break free
from them. The mother may have succeeded in shaking off the dictates of
"the watchdogs of virtue," but she remains unaware of being shackled by
some codes they have fashioned to control and subjugate her. And the end
of the poem complicates rather than resolves the dilemma of this mother and
her daughter as both are apparently trapped by the same unjust patriarchal
tradition.

So far Dharker, who was born into a Muslim family, has been
writing vigorously against this tradition, patriarchally or religiously
mandated, which works to subjugate the Muslim woman in India (or even in
the diaspora). She is especially critical of some tenets of Islamic culture—
again either at home or in the diaspora—that operate to control that
woman's body and land her in an internal exile from herself and the
community around her. She protests against the strict—sometimes
misguided—interpretation of religion which gives woman a subordinate
position in society, diminishing her freedom, dignity, and respect. In the

process, she tackles the different aspects of purdah as a major value of her inherited faith, and she rejects discrimination against woman because of her gender—because of which she is denied access to places of worship, for example. She also criticizes the institution of marriage which, because of inherited patriarchal traditions, reduces woman to the status of a slave, and examines the burden of the same tradition that persists in child's upbringing.

She records same woman's attempt to reclaim herself from the shackles of tradition. She describes how woman challenges the "watchdogs of virtue" and highlights her "great struggle" as she trembles between "being trapped, and being free" ("Outline" 45). The females whose experiences she writes about try to escape the trap of tradition—both in its religious and patriarchal forms—that primarily defines them in degrading terms. Sometimes they succeed, but oftentimes they fail and further social exclusion and un-belonging result. And their struggle is well articulated in the mainstream English poetic tradition in terms of words, sounds, images, and stanza patterns.

الملخص

الجسد المنفي في ديوان البرده وقصائد اخرى (١٩٨٩) للشاعرة امتياز داركر رضا عبد الحي شحاته

يتخذ هذا البحث كإطار نظرياً له نظرية الجسد المنفي للناقدة النسوية مابعد كولونيلية كيتو كاتراك وذلك لدراسة هذا الديوان دراسة نقدية. يوضح البحث كيف أن الجسد الأنثوي أصبح منفياً عن ذاته وكذلك الوسط المحيط به بسبب التقاليد البطريركية والدينية التي تسيطر عليه، مما ينتج عن ذلك حالات من الوجود تبدو خانقه. وفيما يتعلق بالملبس والاعتقاد والزواج تواجه المرأة في المجتمع الهندي -أوحتي في المنفي- بخيارين أما الانصياع لهذه التقاليد أو العيش منفياً عن نفسها ومجتمعها. وتقوم الشاعرة المولودة لأسرة باكستانية مسلمة بنقد هذه التقاليد بشدة. وأشد ما تنقد بعض مظاهر الثقافة الإسلامية التي تخضع لها المرأة عنوة وتنقص من كرامتها واحترامها لذاتها. وهي تنتقد ظاهرة الحجاب عندما يفرض علي المرأة دون إرادتها ويصبح حجاباً لعقلها. كما تنقد أيضاً التمييز ضد المرأة فيما يتعلق بدخولها أماكن العبادة. وتهاجم أيضاً الزواج في النظام البطريركي الذي يحول المرأة الي أمه. كما تهاجم طريقة تربية الأطفال في ظل هذا النظام. وفي سبيل ذلك تصور المرأة وهي تحاول الثورة علي هذه التقاليد -ناجحة أحياناً وفاشلة أحياناً أخرى-. وتقدم هذا من خلال وسائل التعبير التقليدية المتعارف عليها في الشعر الإنجليزي فيما يتعلق باستخدام الصور، والكلمات، والإيقاع وغيرها

مصطلحات أساسية في البحث: الجسد -المنفي- البردة-التقاليد

Notes

1 – Edward Said has voiced similar thoughts about external exile. He tackles the different aspects of it, arguing that an exile represents an "unhealable rift" between an exiled person and his/her "native place, between the self and its true home" (173), and is, in the meantime, "alienated from "traditions, family, and geography" (174). An exile is aware of two homes, two cultures occurring together contrapuntally. Life in exile follows a pattern totally different from life at home: it is "life outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew" (186).

2 – For more information about Dharker's life and work, see Proctor.

3 – Unlike these critics, Renate Papke acknowledges those poets their postcolonial feminist concerns. That critic argues that by addressing those issues in their poetry, they have broadened the thematic and stylistic concerns of contemporary Indian poetry. In addition to Kamala Das (1934-2009) and Eunice de Souza (1940-2017), Swati Guleria groups Dharker with other poets such as Tara Patel (b.1949) and Mamta Kalia (b.1940) with whom she shares some feminist interests.

4 - It was worn in ancient times, but with the advance of Islam, it has become regulated as Islam "appointed the degrees" of its "observance" and its being "compulsory for women" (Begum 2230). Begum is here referring to the Qur'anic verse which calls upon the wives and daughters of the prophet as well as the "women of the believers" to "draw their cloak round them (when they go abroad)" as such practice would be suitable for them "so that they may be recognized and not annoyed" (33:59).

5 – Katak (174-183) enlists some cultural, religious, economic, and political factors at the base of the dowry system in Indian society. In addition to referring to the law status of woman and her being seen as another wealth, it also indicates the power relationship between her and man, which is conceived in terms of a war in which she turns into a pawn.

6 - During her period a Muslim woman is exempt from prayer, and therefore there is no need for her to go to the mosque. But there is nothing whatsoever that can prevent her from coming to the mosque to listen to religious teachings. Even many non-Muslim women can enter historical mosques in Muslim countries. Therefore, the behavior of this Imam reflects one of the many wrong practices against Muslim women which many reformist Muslim scholars wrote against in an attempt to right it. See, for example, El-Ghazaly.

7 – Dharker is here referring to the Qur'anic verse which describes man's creation from "a clot of congealed blood" (96:2). Indeed this is a stage among several stages of man's creation elaborated elsewhere: God says, "We created man out of a quintessence of clay, then We placed him as a drop of sperm in a deep place (womb), then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood out of which We made a (fetus) lump, out of which We made bones which We clothed with flesh, then We developed out of it another creature (a full human being). So blessed is God the best of creators" (23:14-16)—indeed these verses represent an aspect of the scientific genius of the Qur'an. See, Bucaille's chapter on Embryology in the Qur'an.

8 – Dharker never loses faith in the value of a true prayer especially in a foreign land. In "Pariah" (17-18) she resists the external exile enforced on her by forces of the diaspora—who see her as "an untidy shape / on their streets, a scribble leaked / out of a colonial notebook, somehow indiscreet"—by recourse to prayer as a good source of internal peace and comfort:

In the evening I cleanse my mouth.
There is no help but Allah
And the rituals: Wash the hands to the elbows,
A fluttering of fingerprints.

A kind of peace."

9 - In criticizing this system, she stands on similar grounds with other contemporary Indian poets such as Tara Patel, who describes patriarchy as "a long saga of pain" (Guleria 276), Eunice de Souza, who believes that it changes woman into other, and Kamala Das, who says that it imprisons her in a fixed position as the following lines from her poem "An Introduction" clearly show:

...Dress is sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroider, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. (45-48)

10 - The similarity to Kamala Das's poem "The Old Playhouse" is striking. In that poem Das also presents a victimized wife without a personal will:

Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. (1)

11 - Sati is the Hindu practice of the burning to death of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre. This horrific practice of widow burning was common in Indian society till modern times. See Katrak, p.163.

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