

The Fear of Women's Voice in a Patriarchal Society: A study of Imtiaz Dharkar's poem *Tongue*

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Abstract:

Imtiaz Dharker raises her voice against the oppressive male-dominated society which fears the female voice and drowns it thus depriving women of their basic right. Through her writings she questions and counters the male ideology of ruling over not just the female's body but also her voice, thoughts and perspectives. She challenges the notion that silence is the best quality of a woman in her poem "Tongue". Silence is as well projected as the appropriate behaviour of a woman as a woman who speaks less is considered to be more docile, feminine and obedient. In public as the private realm, a man's words are the final ones; his words would not be questioned. So, a dignified woman is expected to keep her tongue quiet. And this trait is groomed from a very young age among the girls. The poet criticizes such code of conduct specially designed for the women and questions the world of patriarchy which refuses to acknowledge the existence of women's voice.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Silence, Tongue, Diaspora

A tongue has two meanings, a part of the body with which one tastes and a language one speaks. A tongue, however, can be more than what it connotes, literally as well as metaphorically. A tongue can give a person the taste of freedom or can bring the wrath of a community, a religion or a system. A tongue can destroy and create at the same time. A tongue then, as many realised, is a powerful tool endowed to mankind. This realisation brought the necessity to curb it, and hence rules and laws were created to check it, restrain and even prohibit the use of it. And to nobody's surprise the womenfolk's tongues were the first ones to be curbed.

Imtiaz Dharkar, the rebel writer, would not however be silenced. Born in Lahore in 1954 to Pakistani parents who migrated to Glasgow when she was less than a year old, Dharkar was familiar with both the world of captivity and of freedom. A renowned poet she has created a mark in the field of feminist writings as well as among one of the best Indian women writers. Her poems are indictment of any society, religion or culture which treats women as inferior to men. Dharker is known for her rebellious and straightforward poems which have found their ways in many school and college curriculum and are widely read across the world. She is not just a distinguished poet, but also a documentary film maker who was raised in Britain. Her first book 'Purdah' (an Urdu word for veil) was published in 1989 and another 'Postcards from God' in 1994. Both the books of poetry are deemed to be among the best feminist works on poetry. The present paper analyses the various themes of the poem 'Tongue' and how silence becomes a tool in a male-dominated society to keep patriarchy going on.

The poem 'Tongue' can be understood at two levels: literal and metaphorical. The poet visits her dentist, Dr Naterwala, one of the kindest dentists she has met, and perhaps her favourite one, to treat a back tooth which has been troubling her for twenty long years. As the treatment procedure begins, the dentist reprimands her saying "Your tongue is fighting me". The poet says that this statement sounds familiar, even though the

source is different, indicating to the readers that she and many women have grown up listening to this accusation by their parents, relatives, society etc:

‘Your tongue is fighting me’.
 This sounds familiar, but
 The source is new.
 Dr Naterwala, one of the kindest
 Dentists I have met,
 Struggling with a backtooth
 And twenty years of trauma,
 Has decided that
 Enough is enough.

In the same stanza, the poet describes the back tooth to have caused her trauma and not simply physical pain. Trauma is a mental pain and, in the context of the poem, hasn't arisen because of the back tooth alone. The twenty years of pain in the tooth then can be understood as the ever present discomfort she faced as a girl, as a woman growing up in a patriarchal society. The trauma has to be put to an end as the doctor says 'enough is enough'. The trauma that the poet mentions is not just physical pain but the psychological suffering of being not able to voice one's true opinions and emotions. Dharker through the symbol of dental treatment is questioning the world of patriarchy which refuses to acknowledge the existence of women's voice. Soma Das in her essay "Voices of Dissent in the Poetry of Imtiaz Dharker" reinforces this point when she says, "Dharker is the poet who with an undaunted zest rebels against patriarchal oppressions that operate in various social trajectories. Her poetic volumes are eloquent with a discourse which can be studied as an indictment of socio-cultural and religious convictions that have robbed women of their freedom, dignity, self-assertion and have left them as physical and mental wrecks at the mercy of men. A veritable reading of her poetry makes it clear to a perceptible eye that the feminist concerns of Dharker make her distinctly articulate the agony and anguish, pity and sympathy for those poor, wretched women who become prey at the hands of the custodians of culture, and religious orthodoxy."

'Your tongue is fighting me', 'Your tongue must learn to keep still' are some universal complaints women are accustomed to hearing. Speeches have changed the course of history and will continue to do so. Dictators, anarchists and male chauvinists have misused and controlled the freedom of speech to consolidate their power. But, the same power of speech has liberated many from the cudgels of slavery and captivity. Dharker's plea in the poem is to allow women to speak up, to give them a voice and most importantly give them the right as anyone else's the right to speech.

In the second stanza, the poet criticizes the code of conduct specially designed for the women. In many cultures, an ideal woman is defined by many parameters. One of the most essential among them is related to speech. A quiet and less talkative woman is advocated as a desirable woman. In a conservative Muslim society, a woman is alienated both in the private and public realm and seldom find any medium for expressing her thoughts. Any attempt to question or disrespect such "decorum" can attract severe punishment. So, silence becomes both an escape and a protection against the male peering ears. But as argued by Honey Singhal in his essay "Aesthetics of Feminism in the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker and Charmayne d'Souza: A Critical Study" Dharker represents and speaks not just as a Muslim woman, but womanhood as a whole. Singhal says, "She intends to cross the boundaries of name, religion and

nationality. Feeling of rootlessness, lack of freedom in speech, identity crisis, religious anomalies etc. are sensed in her poems...”

‘Your tongue must learn to keep still’.
This I’ve heard often,
But not in such a literal sense.
Keeping my tongue still,
All my life
Has been a highly recommended skill.

Silence is as well projected as the appropriate behaviour of a woman as a woman who speaks less is considered to be more docile, feminine and obedient. In public as the private realm, a man’s words are the final ones; his words would not be questioned. So, a dignified woman is expected to keep her tongue quiet. And this trait is groomed from a very young age among the girls. Thus, the poet sarcastically mentions that staying silent is a highly ‘recommended skill’ in a woman.

Dharker raises her voice against the oppressive male-dominated society which fears the female voice and drowns it thus depriving women of their basic right. Through her writings she questions and counters the male ideology of ruling over not just the female’s body but also her voice, thoughts and perspectives. When the poet is told by the dentist to forget her tongue, she is taken by surprise as many a time she has been accused by both her family members and outsiders of forgetting her tongue and thus forgetting her place as a woman. Dharker’s resentment is not just against the society but it is also directed towards her family and relatives.

‘I want to help you
Just forget your tongue.’
Oh Dr Naterwala,
You’d be amused if you knew
How often I’d been accused
Of doing just that.

Family can and is the agent of patriarchy in many contexts. The first lessons of societal norms are handed down to a child by his/her parents. Home, a space where one can be one’s true self and where one can feel protected can become the very space of oppression and subjugation. So, in the poem when Dharker says that the statements of the dentist are familiar, she is indicating a childhood spent listening to the chidings and taunting by her near ones. The use of the word “accused” in the above stanza indicates how disobeying by speaking up or arguing can be considered a crime and could entail serious consequences.

Conflicting linguistic identity is a recurring theme in many of Dharker’s poems. A polyglot, she clearly understood and experienced the identity crisis that arises out of linguistic and cultural displacement. As pointed out by Bailey Betik in her essay “Behind the Back of Borders: Diaspora Microspace in Imtiaz Dharker’s Poetry”, Dharker’s “self-attributed existence of living ‘between borders’ is evident in her poetry’s vivid depictions of everyday life as both profoundly South Asian and profoundly British, alternating between the comforts and complications that come from that hybrid diaspora identity.” Salim Jahangeer in his article A Comparative Study of Agha Shahid Ali and Imtiaz Ali” further emphasises on the dilemma faced by diasporic writers:

The sense of loss, the memory of 'home' and the pain of being separated to a new land and culture disturbs them. Thus due to the fear of losing the socio-cultural individuality in their newly displaced Western society they make conscious efforts to affirm their Indian national individuality and at the same time to absorb with the new culture of West. They are studied on the basis of the wide range of experiences which they gained not only from their exile life, but also from their motherland by different means which help to grow their diasporic consciousness. (Jahangeer, p-5)

'Just let it relax.'
 And then the other thing:
 If the water-drill were not
 Inside my mouth, I'd ask,
 Which of my many tongues
 Should I forget?
 There are so many in here
 And I fear they're not all mine
 Not originally.

It is then to no surprise that she asks the doctor in the poem which of her many tongues she should forget: Urdu, English, or Hindi. Born in one culture, brought up in another, people like Dharker remain outsiders both in their home country as well as the adopted one. Thus, Betik rightly points out that it is understandable that Dharker, an author of diaspora, should "view her life's spaces as marked by in-betweenness. Poetically, her works are all too aware of the societal binaries she lives sandwiched between: that of both Other and indigene, of her private identity and the public reception of it."

A very interesting aspect of the poem is how the tongue has been endowed with a will of its own. It fights, knows how to keep still, rebels and even feels smug. By attributing an individual's character to the tongue, the poet indicates that a person has the right to remain silent or speak up and that one cannot be silenced without putting up a fight. And the use of language to counter oppression becomes evident when the poet talks of the tongue involved in a 'combat'.

Before I came again, I decide
 I must practice ignoring my
 Rebellious tongue,
 Forgetting it is there,
 Taking it out if combat.

Fragile afterwards,
 On the ride back home
 My smug tongue slides
 Like a happy slug
 Across a newly smoother tooth.

There's something to be said,
 After all,
 For giving in.

The result of the combat is worthwhile, however. Though the tongue feels fragile after the visit to the dentist, it feels happy as it slides across a smoother tooth. Challenging society norms and conventions requires perseverance, courage and the nerve to face consequences. It is no wonder then that the speaker feels tired and exhausted but eventually it pays off. Fighting for one's right and raising one's voice against subjugation will be emotionally and physically draining, but it will also fetch freedom and dignity.

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