

Feministic approach in Imitiyaz Dharker's "Purdah I" and "Purdah II"

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Abstract

Feministic approaches by various female writers have always been discussed in their own ways and means. Imitiyaz Dharker has also made her debut into this field. This paper is giving an insight about her struggles while living in oppression of being in 'Purdah'. According to her the 'Purdah' which has often being used in the Islamic societies as the ultimate symbol of paternalistic subjugation of women, wants to get rid of it by her own. She feels that its oppressiveness comes out of the concept of shame. She is of the opinion that no doubt 'Purdah' provides security but then she argues by saying security is not always of the cocoon, but acts as the prison of the cell or a shroud. It may protect you at some moment of time, but it also destroys.

Key Words: Feminism, Purdah, Muslim, Culture, Oppression.

INTRODUCTION

The word Feminist comes from Feminism, which originally meant "being feminine" or "being a woman" but gained the meaning "advocacy of women's rights" in the late 1800. Feminism can be called as cultural, political and intellectual movement that recognizes the fact of oppression of women and seeks ways and means to emancipate them. It is a belief that aims at giving equal rights and equal opportunities to women that men already enjoy. Themes that are being highlighted in feminism are stereotyping, oppression and patriarchy. Simon De Beauvoir, an ardent feminist, in her book 'The Second Sex' depicts condition of women and shows how women are actually on the margin of the periphery of the patriarchal society. They are perhaps seen as the worst sufferers amongst the all. She says that "Man thinks himself without a woman; woman doesn't think herself without a man." (Beauvoir 26)

Imitiyaz Dharker occupies an important place as one of the Britain's most inspirational contemporary poets. She was a diasporic writer who was born in Pakistan, brought up in Scotland and got married in India. A cosmopolitan muslim herself, she represents the confluence of three cultures: Pakistani, British and India to show the power and authority which robs women of their self esteem, her dignity and identity. Dharker's poetry seems to be a reflection of her own experiences and reflection of her own life. Her exposure to different aspects of life is much reflected in her poetry. Almost in all her poems she is being seen highlighting the rights of women. We find her voice as a subaltern status of women, especially Muslim women. In the given poems we find her trying to protest against the conventional ways of treatment of women by accusing the same ways as hindrance for a women to prosper and thereby, telling the world to give woman primary position in all aspects of life men enjoy. Bruce King has rightly described Dharker's work as "consciously feminist, consciously political, consciously that of a multiple outsider, someone who knows her own mind, rather than someone full of doubt and liberal ironies" (321)

PURDAH I

The poem 'Purdah I' appeared in Dharker's first collection of poetry. Broadly, Purdah, a Persian word means the practice in Muslims and certain Hindu societies of screening women from men or strangers, especially by means of a curtain or what we call as veil. The Purdah represents two different requisites i.e. Physical segregation of the sexes and the requirement for women to cover their bodies and conceal their form. Thus, 'Purdah I' is a protest against the veil strictly being imposed upon Muslim women. She sees Purdah as something which marginalizes women and wants a Muslim girl who is confined in Purdah to suppress this tyranny. She questions the relation between Purdah and basic rights, freedom and dignity of women. She presents to us observing Purdah as something that stands as an alienation from one's own self, which a woman is supposed or expected to do under societal norms even if she doesn't wish to do it. A woman, according is made to accept the truth that she is a woman through this veil since her birth as Aristotle says, "The female is a female by lack of certain qualities". (Deboviour 26).

She wants to convey that this veil is considered as sort of identity of being a woman. A woman is supposed to feel ashamed if she doesn't observe Purdah so, keeping in consideration the same shame she believes Islamic orthodoxy uses it to repress a woman's sexuality. In 'Purdah I' she says, "Purdah is a kind of safety. The body finds a place to hide. The cloth fans out against the skin much like the earth that falls on coffins after they put dead men in". these lines imply that no doubt Purdah was considered as a kind of safety that was used to hide body but with the passage of time, when the world started objectifying her seeing her as an 'other' she sought to take refugee by wearing this Purdah. She started hiding in her own skin. As Simon De Beauvoir has rightly quoted in 'The Second Sex' "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (14). Thus, this Purdah becomes or creates a notion of becoming a woman. Through this Purdah they want to seek refugee from patriarchal dominated society. She wants a woman to rebel against all this. Purdah is compared to a coffin for women, giving them somewhat like a burial treatment

even when they are alive, breathing fine. She wants women to suppress the tyrannical darkness and move ahead with strength and prosper. She wants her to reject all hindrances and thereby, challenging religious orthodoxy. Dharker further says, “She stands outside a self, sometimes in all four corners of a room. Wherever she goes, she’s always inching past herself.” What she means by these lines is when a girl or woman finally becomes aware of herself, she finds herself completely dominated and suppressed by the patriarchy and various other societal and religious norms. She can feel herself confine to the four corners of the room where is bound to do household chores. She struggles to breathe freely like men and finds her space limited to her own world. Wherever she goes, she feels alienated, even sometimes from her own self. Even her childhood friends become strangers for her and she for them.

PURDAH II

An adamant rebel and a staunch feminist, Dharker in ‘Purdah II’ draws her attention to harsh Islamic cultural practices where women are being exposed. The poem expresses serious humanistic and feministic aspects this poem is a rebellious criticism to the ways which a woman is obliged to follow under societal, cultural and religious norms. She terms these ways as oppression on a woman and her choices. She calls for men to give equal rights to the woman in every aspect of life. Dharker also refers to the love story of Saleema who falls for an Englishman but is unfortunately obliged by her religion to marry within her community. By this she wants to say that woman want to break all of this norms and law which govern their life and takes stand of their own by rebelling against the same. She wants to vanish the religious orthodoxy in order to live alive of equality under her own will and choices. She wants to break away from religious impositions. Dharker says, “The pages of the Koran turn smooth as old bones in your prodigal hands.” By this she means to pioneer a protest against religious orthodoxy. According to her, the holy book of Muslims, The Koran is spiritual and its pages have a power to teach and inspire life but they instead appear as ‘old bone’ to Muslim woman. She finds the religion itself as male oriented and justifies it by giving us the example of mosques where only men are allowed to pray upon listening to a call for prayer. These notions, according to her, provide no solace to woman but add to their miseries by supporting men rather than women.

She, desperately and fearlessly wants a woman to protest and rebel against the discrimination in this male dominated world as she says, “Break cover. Break cover and let us see the ghosts of the girls with tell-tale lips”. She wants women to shut all the norms and break away from what is hindering them from prosperity and happiness. She wants to share the experiences of those women who have been reduced to ghosts by mighty men. She sympathizes with them and even pleads to other women to throw away or tear apart their purdah. She detests the way purdah alienates them and shuns their will and choices.

She also draws our attention to the fact that why women should be held responsible for everything that happens in and around the society. She means to tell us that everything shameful in the society shouldn’t be related to women. She urges to end this oppression. She says, “Naseema you ran away and your mother burned with shame”. She questions here that why is that a mistake of one woman is imposed upon all the other women related to her? She calls for all the women to summon up protest against this demeaning power. She wants them to give away this ideology of shame.

CONCLUSION

Bruce King appreciates the way Dharker critiques the orthodox Islamic culture that treats women as slaves and commodities. Thus, Dharker through these poems portrays purdah as something that seems to have connection with femininity and hinders the growth of a woman’s life. Just like a prisoner traps a person and makes him alienated to the outside world, purdah to Dharker serves the same purpose alienating a woman not just to the external world but to her own self as well. Her identity seems to be lost during all this. The veil further adds a false notion of providing security and safety to the women folk and in turn, seems to add to her insecurities and miseries. Hence, she finds a woman suffering more due to this and Dharker has created a mirror image of feminine sensibility through her poems which reveal the presence of Purdah in various forms between a woman and freedom. We can note the way Dharker throughout her poems presents purdah as a tool of marginalization, metaphor for the way women hide themselves into their own skins seeking refugee from male dominant society.

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