

**Marginalization and Fundamentalism in Imtiaz Dharker's
*I Speak for the Devil***

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/I-Speak-Devil-Imtiaz-Dharker/dp/1852245697>

Abstract

Dharker's poetry seems to be a reflection of her own life. Her real-life exposure is very much visible in her multi-faceted poetry. Recurrent themes found in her works make her a global poet. Her poetry delivers expression of freedom, geographical and cultural displacement, journeying, search for identity, diaspora, religious strife and feminism. Dharker has implemented her artistic side in her poetry to make it even more vivid. She has presented poetry in a pictorial way with her sketches which run

parallel to the themes of the poems. Feeling of rootlessness, lack of freedom in speech, identity crisis, religious anomalies etc. are sensed in her poems in her third book *I speak for the devil* (2001). Her own revolutionary journey is a unique example for her readers as she raises her voice against stubborn principles of religion. She sends a message that women themselves need to rise and rebel against the bias and brutality extended by gender diplomacy. Her concentration remained on marginalized Muslim women, but her exasperation and outrage against the unjust treatment of women is all-embracing women in general too.

Keywords: Imtiaz Dharker, *I Speak for the Devil*, fundamentalism, gender studies, cultural myths, women liberation, patriarchy.

Dharker's Artistic Sketches

Dharker manoeuvres her poetic skills and artistic sketches to encase the persecution and pain of women inflicted by male hegemonic leadership. Researcher Radhika Wasson writes regarding Dharker's insight about her imagery. Dharker herself says, "Everything starts with the image: sometimes as the line of a poem, sometimes as something I see as a visual, a drawing. No, that's not always true. Sometimes a poem can start with an idea and that can in turn spark off a drawing."

I speak for the devil

The title *I speak for the devil* says a lot about the collection of poems set in this section. It begins with a magnificent poem titled 'The djinn in Auntie' and describes a strange and bizarre relation between a woman and an unearthly being. Unlike other poets and authors who use a djinn to demonstrate evil and malicious acts, Imtiaz Dharker assimilates the association between a body and a spirit in a distinctive and exclusive way. The poet has rendered her verses in a story form therefore it is easily comprehensible. The djinn in this poem is not malevolent or harmful in any manner. Poet's story-like poem sets in motion with a brief portrayal about a woman, who is seen playing and celebrating her youthful years with her friends in her village. She is heard in a 'high-pitched noise' and is merrymaking her years of freedom. In the second stanza, this woman is advised to follow rules and keep her mouth shut. She stays hushed and unexpressed all the years till she becomes a mother. It is inevitable to not notice Dharker's mode of expression:

One minute she was out there,
screaming and cartwheeling...

The next they said she must sit still
and shut her mouth.
She did it for a while,
right through a marriage and a child.

The poet continues with an incident when this woman 'went down to the khassi' and it was then when a djinn or a ghostly being enters her. The fourth stanza hints about the devilish gestures experienced by the woman. She is surprised to experience an unfamiliar sound from her mouth. Dharker whispers here an intrinsic inherent superstition in the society which believes in such unnatural powers and look up to

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them to solve their queries of life. So this news which is unstoppable to be held unsaid, spreads to miles around and people pour in to encounter the adventure. Poet has donated one stanza to give examples of various questions asked by the visitors. The interaction between natural and the supernatural is quite irresistible and displays facets of superstition or blind faith in fallacy and witchcraft. Dharker yields the uncanny in a noteworthy manner as:

It took her by surprise, next day,
when she opened her mouth
and the other voice began to sing:
a sound, not hers.

And then the women and men came in
to hear her from miles around, ...
asking her about people she had never seen.

Voice Against Animal Sacrifice

As poem progress further, this woman with unnatural charisma is seen warning her children to not stay in the 'khassi' for very long as she had experienced the ghostly side from the same place. The poet does not make the meaning of 'khassi' clear since she utilizes this word twice in this poem, both as a being and as a place. When questioned about this word, it offers a couple of meanings. khassi means anything or anybody of not much relevance or use; it also refers to an infertile animal. This poem bears undercurrents of a probable raging voice against animal sacrifice done in the name of religion. Poet Jerry Pinto meets Imtiaz Dharker to discuss God and the Devil and postulates, "*I Speak for the Devil* (recently released by Penguin India) does not feature a Miltonic Lucifer, Faustian double-dealer or sulphurous Beelzebub. He lurks in the *khassi* (a Brit-Punjabi word for the toilet that seems to be part of a private idiolect); ... Why should the devil be a monolithic unitary figure?"

The Djinn

The djinn or the wandering spirit mentioned in the poem hints towards the irrational customs celebrated by slaughtering animals whose souls rove around for justification. Also, speculating the same from the other side, poet is probably aiming at the shadowed presence of a woman in society. Two short stanzas are evidently proving the same when Dharker says,

But secretly she knew
she'd be lost without the thing inside her.

Her djinn was a gift
she got one day
when she hoped for nothing.

Not Unhappy Under a Ghostly Power

The woman who is overpowered by another ghostly power is not actually unhappy about her state. She feels glad and gifted since she is given so much importance which she had always longed for

and finds herself in the center of attraction. She was never otherwise given this recognition by her family and others and remained an insignificant invisible member who was always occupied in thankless jobs. Having encountered and enjoyed the change of being in limelight, she had no complains to make with respect to the whole scene. She rather feels connected to the djinn and listens to the story whispered inside her by the djinn. The djinn tells her about a boy who is narrating this story to a woman in another country. Dharker has purposely mentioned about the clothing and relocation of this woman who is wearing a tight skirt exposing her legs. Poet is trying to decipher that this woman feels liberated from the imposed customs, traditions and lifestyle which are designed for women to subjugate them.

In another country, says the djinn,
that boy Ayub Khan-Din is drinking wine
and telling our story
to a woman in skin-tight skirt
that shows all of her legs.

This woman has our look.
Set free, at last.

The Location

Another poem 'The Location' looks out for territory occupied by the devil. Poet hunts for the devil in things and actions but unfurls her perplexity when she realizes that the devil has occupied her psyche and persona. Poetic beauty lies in her penny plain demonstration of thoughts yet revealing the aspired announcement.

The devil was in me,
walking in my feet,
living in my clothes,
owning one half
of my heartbeat.

Devil's Inhabitation in Us

Dharker imports her turmoil and sends a message to all that the devil proves its inhabitation in us by our own draconian and extremist thinking. Her words launch a ruckus in the reader's mind so as to become a freethinker and be released from the slavery of diktats who enslave and defeat our wisdom by their fanatic views on religion, nationality and gender. Dharker projects that the devil has settled and has deeply established itself in our vital force, but we fail to recognize and rise above it.

There was no buying, selling, bartering,
no attempt to deceive.
One day I felt occupied.
That was all.

Devil as Spokesperson

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Devil becomes a spokesperson in ‘The devil’s day’ and imitates nauseous intention and gluttony of human workers who are fraudsters, racketeers, lawbreakers, pimps, swindlers etc., affecting daily smooth functioning of the society. The devil is greedy here and aspires to have given ‘half a chance’ to be like wolfish and mercenary people.

It’s seeing his face.
Wishing it were mine.

It’s being hungry for his grace.

Role and Place of Women

Dharker’s dearest dismay towards role and place of women is intelligible and poetically articulated yet again in her poem ‘In bed with the devil’. She transcends to another juncture in conveying her message towards eloquent elevation of women in a male pre-eminent setup. Poem’s first line, ‘He’s at it again’ brings recollection of the notion that it has always been ‘he’ who was ‘making pacts of power’. It also denotes that only man has been considered to possess the potential to be a power bearer. Dharker reminds the reader of the various roles enjoyed by men only, and how he remains in spotlight and limelight to overshadow and hegemonize women, when she says,

He’s spoken to the journalists,
shaken all the hands
smiled into the camera,
shown the proper sympathy; given gifts,
watched the briefcase
make its way to inner rooms.

Confinement to Four Walls of the Family

Closure of the poem ultimately pronounces the bit part and contribution of a woman. Her job commences in the ‘inner rooms’, away from the outer world. This stark publicity of the situation of men and women deliver the fact that their male counterparts in all notable domains always outshined women, and her job remained condensed to the four walls of the house and to obey all the needs and desires of their bearers. Said structure is so deep-rooted that it has become the face of our cultural system. Author Jasbir Jain aptly states that, “There has been a constant need to negotiate cultural myths which are part of the socialization of the girl child and to retell and reinterpret them”.

Pity on Her Own Self

In her reinterpretation of gender studies, religious disharmony, fall-out for nationality, applying devil as a metaphor, Dharker does not spare or pity her own self. She drags and accepts that her sayings too, are under the influence of politics and corrupt ideologies. She frames this facet by a lucid presentation of a short dialogue by the devil to her. ‘The devil to the poet’ is a thumbnail in which she declares that ‘her pretty words’ and ‘delicate observations’ too must be read, probed and scrutinized, since her mind is not a different fragment, but an innate portion formed in the same complex arrangement of society. Dharker delineates,

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Don't pretend that you're
above all this.

When it comes to survival,
all your pretty words
and delicate observations
boil right down

to politics.

The devil to god

Ingrained fundamentalist ideas are brought to prominence in the poem "The devil to god" in a remarkably subtle way. As poem begins, devil appreciates the 'programmes' of God but negates the way they are rendered to people, who blindly practice these. Authenticity of the leaders who claim to be the harbingers of God is questioned here. The manipulated and adulterated meanings of God's words, under the influence of religious and gender politics are beastly enough that the devil fearlessly dares to ask God if he could be the ambassador of His Kingdom. The so-called interpreters like of the maulvis, priests and sadhus are seen as wicked and so ungodly, that the devil finds him worthy and more befitting to their roles. Professor R. K. Bhushan rightly says in this context, "Devil awakens god to the bitter truth that those who serve and promote the Kingdom of God in the human world are far from being His devotees. These lines are an unsaid and un-promised assurance to the Master, 'Sir', to do better justice to the implementation of his programmes. Not only this, God himself is unaware of how the angels in His employ are misusing the divine powers and authority and all His programmes are a miscarriage in the human world." Dharker formulates this monologue by the devil as:

Dear Sir,
I'm a fan of all your programmes,
but the promos are bad.
Who writes your scripts?
Can I apply?

Honour Killing

'Honour Killing' has clear demarcations of religious orthodoxy, which, according to the poet is deep-rooted in Islamic culture. Tradition of a veil worn by Muslim women is described as a compulsory 'habit' with 'no choice'. Poet describes this cultural tradition in form of a 'coat', 'veil', 'silks', 'skin', 'face', 'flesh', 'womb', etc. Unclouded Contemplation of modified culture, which is inflicted on women in the name of God, is accessible in the lines:

I'm taking off this veil,
this black veil of a faith
that made me faithless
to myself,

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that tied my mouth,
gave my god a devil's face,
and muffled my own voice.

Poet gathers the poem in an unassertive tone as she says that she would like to see what is left behind in her after deducting her past from her present being. Poet realizes in the next line that her existing state is nothing more than a baggage or a reminiscence of her bygone years. What she finds after subtracting her past is just an 'easy cage of bone', representing barren, bleak and a departed soul. Last lines have a glimpse of anticipation towards a new introduction to one's own self when she plans to plot her 'new geography'.

Tongue

In the poem "Tongue", Dharker distinguishes a lingual uproar in a celebrated and mocking way. A visit to the dentist and his struggle with the patient's tongue during treatment is used as an occasion to highlight the scuffle dealt in day-to-day life.

'Your tongue is fighting me'...
Dr Naterwala, one of the kindest
dentists I have met...
has decided that
enough is enough.

Miss Suchismita Dutta, in her paper, "The Prison Called 'Home': A Feminist study of Imtiaz Dharker's *I Speak for the Devil*" says, "'Your tongue is fighting me' – is the universal complaint that the entire patriarchal has had against the group of subalterns called women". The word 'tongue' is used as a metaphor, which represents lack of freedom to speech for women and language-bound hierarchy that varies from one place to another. This poem is quirky for its heavy scorn and irony, having every line painted with hilarity.

'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?

Conclusion

Dharker's verses have flourished and achieved an expansion from feminist struggle to fundamentalist turbulence and have procured quantum leap which marks her poetic occupancy among connoisseurs. Albert Camus's saying "Obeying the flame is both the easiest and the hardest thing" seems apt for Dharker's poetic journey since she conveys her viewpoint on difficult and daunted themes in an unimaginably simple way. Subjects of her concern are delicate and diplomatic ones, which are entitled to receive varied judgments from the society. Dharker's rebellious agitation against cultural impositions and religious curtailment has propagated the wave of transformation and her life is a true

example of this change. She advocates the ‘devil’ in her poems to remove the veil of extreme chauvinist thinking. Her turmoil does not aim only to expose fundamentalist constructs and marginalization of women, but also attempts to reconstruct and reconcile these concerns.

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