

Framing Selves: Home, Gender, and Politics in the Poetry of Imtiaz Dharker

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Abstract: Imtiaz Dharker is an important voice in South Asian diasporic poetry. Her work enunciates the challenges that various marginalized communities face in their quotidian dealings with society and the state. This article reads her poems and drawings from *I Speak for the Devil* (2001) and *The Terrorist at My Table* (2006) to highlight the internal and external conflictual negotiations involved for women in the formation of resistant selves that aim to critique gendered, societal, and political norms harshly imposed on women. Her poetry consciously reframes selves and expresses the questions and possibilities that inhere in this process. The emergence of a productive instability of poetic form and meaning in her work charts avenues and modes for her poetic subjects to rediscover agency in their private and public lives. The article shows how Dharker's poetry invests the future with potential for the emergence of consciously political selves.

Keywords: Imtiaz Dharker, South Asian poetry, home, belonging, surveillance

In this article I read Imtiaz Dharker's poetry from her collections *I Speak for the Devil* (2001) and *The Terrorist at My Table* (2006), alongside her drawings, to foreground the political function of poetry in South Asian postcolonial contexts. Dharker questions the formation—and use—of identities and desires and charts the possibility of resistance for women when faced with hegemonic forces like patriarchy and the state that seek to pin down, define, and circumscribe identities for women. In my reading, Dharker's poetry is a response marked by scepticism towards

any attempt at sure definitions and thus aesthetically represents the struggle to define a space of one's own against the relentless imposition of identities.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses Dharker's statements from interviews to show how she complicates the question of belonging by eschewing neat categorizations that may seek to define her through idioms like nation/country and home. While inside and outside are spatial metaphors that are often used to define people through their boundedness to markers of identity, any attempt to fix identity is shown by Dharker to be ontologically incomplete. The second section focuses on her collection *I Speak for the Devil*. Women in this book subvert the ways in which they internalize patriarchy and are then expected to conform to its demands when the devil makes them challenge patriarchal norms. Dharker's allegorical use of the devil performs a double act: it mimics the lack of agency that women are blamed for and simultaneously holds the devil responsible for their freedom. If a person's psychological interiority is constantly being remade, Dharker's collection *The Terrorist at My Table* shows how what is outside the psyche is equally fraught. External markers of identity like photographs, birthmarks, skin colour, or names are used by the state to fix identities in equally stereotypical, reductive, and dangerous ways. The third section of this essay uses three poems—and the drawings that accompany them—to show Dharker's intense discomfort with state apparatuses and the question of identity marked on the outside.

When framed under the umbrella term "Indian poetry in English," Dharker has mostly been read as a woman poet or as a diasporic poet, but her work has received little sustained critical attention. For Bruce King, her poetry "examines large social problems"; he describes her work as a "poetry of commitment and politics" (326). Lopamudra Basu and Santosh Gupta, respectively, read Dharker alongside other diasporic poets like Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, and Agha Shahid Ali. Basu focuses on the use of language and the politics of reception for these diasporic poets while situating them in their varied global contexts to represent what, according to her, is "the fruition of Indian poetry in diaspora" (389). Akshaya Kumar, like Basu, treats Dharker as a diasporic

poet, arguing that boundaries between the migrant and the native blur in Indian English poetry as most poets “claim both spaces without any guilt of cultural contradiction” (63) and that “[t]he new poets . . . internalize the alien so much that the gap between the alien and the outsider no longer remains an issue of cultural contention; experience and observation consolidate the poetic expression” (93). Rajeev Patke counts Dharker as inscribing a gendered protest against the collusion of religious orthodoxy with sexism in *Purdah and Other Poems* (1988) and *I Speak for the Devil* (“Postcolonial Protest” 189–90). Other than these cursory mentions, Dharker’s poetry has received focused critical attention only in Filippo Menozzi’s recent work. Menozzi reads Dharker’s 2009 collection, *Leaving Fingerprints*, through the prism of poetic experimentalism and peripheral modernism to argue that her poetry shows migrants in Europe as “peripheral subjects caught in the power dynamics of capitalist globalization” (152) and that her experimental aesthetic “engages with the subject’s lack of voice and of belonging as a counterpoint to being framed by technologies of identity and knowledge” (155). Situating Dharker’s poetry in a South Asian context allows me to read her work as engaging with the multilayered social and political realities of women in the region and thus nuance the work of critics who see her just as a woman writer who writes about women. Through a close reading of her poems, I show how Dharker illuminates the many religious conflicts and invisible social negotiations that normalize conformity for the vast majority of women in South Asia.

I. Constructing Home

Though she was born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1954, Dharker left Pakistan for Glasgow, Scotland as a one-year-old child. She then lived in Mumbai, India for many years and now lives between Britain and India.¹ Any attempt to categorize Dharker in terms of her nationality—as Indian, Pakistani, Scottish, or Welsh—is an exercise fraught with contradictions that her own words testify to. In a number of interviews Dharker problematizes notions of home, country, and body to locate herself tenuously within the semantic bounds of these words. Speaking of her experience growing up in Glasgow, she says evocatively, “there was

one country inside the house and one outside, not necessarily in a bad way. I could slip from one to the other, the way children slip from one language to another if they are bilingual" (Interview by Shivdasani 129). She reminisces about this easy elision of nationalities and languages as a constitutive feature of her identity when she speaks of her first visit to Pakistan as a thirteen-year-old. She says, "when I came across this lush landscape, all those fields of maize and fruit, it was like a dream come true. I knew it had always been there" (132).

When asked by Eunice de Souza in an interview, "What does 'freedom' mean to you as a woman of Pakistani origin who lived in Britain?" she replied, "I don't think of a western girl going out with a boy as freedom. Freedom is something inside you. Being able to stand outside a culture is freedom. I love being an outsider. . . . Being an outsider is my country. I value that. That's the country all writers belong to—standing outside the body too, outside the image" (Interview by de Souza 113–14). The question attempts to imprison her within the totalizing contexts of gender, nationalities, and origins. However, the modality of her answer breaks the totalizing hold of the question. Freedom for Dharker is not an outer attribute or a flag to be waved but an ontological state, an inner state of being. This definition of freedom is enriched by her assertion that "[b]eing an outsider is [her] country." She deliberately breaks the category of the country through which the question attempts to define her. Though the frame of the country remains, it is subversively emptied of its ideological constraints. If being an outsider is her country, then her relationship to any country is necessarily tangential and mediated through her. No longer are social, cultural, and political loyalties, which seek to contain and define her personhood in the idiom of the country, seen as binding impositions, and temporally she can inhabit a present that is not defined by the past of any country. This chronological displacement leads to an ironic and important reversal: instead of the country defining her, she defines herself in a specific relation to the idiom of the country. This redefinition of both herself and "country" moves beyond Pakistan and Britain (the countries in the immediate context) and implicitly, therefore, beyond the imaginary of the country/nation.

In addition to the country, Dharker also has a uniquely tangential relationship with the idea of home. Speaking to fellow poet Arundhati Subramaniam, Dharker says, “I may never be able to define my home, but the question is, do I want to? Where is my home anyway? In Scotland under a particular group of trees? In the texture of a fabric? The feel of rain? In the end, you carry these things with you wherever you go. Home for me is here, but it’s also in the smell of the south of France. Cezanne and Van Gogh are my relatives” (“A Poet’s Voice”). As is evident in this interview, home for Dharker can be (re)moulded at will and is not constrained by political identification through the nation/state or bound by the logic of spatiality. In its plurality home can be a natural or sensorial experience. This energetic disavowal of the accepted notions of home creates an unsettling fluidity of definitions and an affective positioning that Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani refer to as “diasporic privilege” (19). At the same time, this conceptualization of home generates what they call “an alienation towards homeliness that incorporates a necessary skepticism toward normalization” (19). Contra the generally accepted notions of diaspora, which function through myths of return or of the homeland (real or imagined), Dharker “does not see the need to choose definitively between the different communities of which she is a part and instead allows the fact of belonging to each to revitalize all” (Dix 56).

Dharker’s response to de Souza also clarifies that she stands outside the body and the image—both ideological constructions—that attempt to rigidly codify, regulate, and imprison her. This liminal position allows Dharker many advantages. First, it becomes a constant and consciously reflective (re)positioning of the self in relation to home, country, and normative images of the female body. Second, this awareness works as a self-regulating feature that aims to prevent any appropriation of this liminality. As a political mode of defiance, being an outsider allows for an illuminating mistrust about the possible nature of the putative inside. It is this productive skepticism that energizes the form and content of Dharker’s poetry (and drawings) to critique any social/political/cultural/religious formations that demand homogenized, settled, or conformist explanations.

II. Patriarchy and Questions of Self

The position of being an outsider is in many ways the central concern of Dharker's poetry. Her female characters choose the position of outsider to the country, culture, body, and image. The opening poem of her collection *I Speak for the Devil*, "Honour Killing," is a case in point. The poem, as the gloss notes, was written in response to a very specific situation:

In Lahore, in the last year of the
20th century, a woman was shot
by her family in her lawyer's office.
Her crime was that she had asked
for a divorce.
The whole Pakistan senate refused
to condemn the act.
They called it an 'honour killing.'
(Dharker, *I Speak for the Devil* 11)

In the face of this violence, the speaker progressively removes various items from her body that have political or religious significance and then goes on to challenge herself:

At last I'm taking off this coat,
this black coat of a country
that I swore for years was mine,
that I wore more out of habit
than design.
Born wearing it,
I believed I had no choice. (13)

She decides, finally, "[a]t last," as though something has suddenly snapped inside her, that she needs to take off the "black coat of [the] country," which she thought was innate. She believed in the essentialism of the nation that had been habitually ingrained in her since she was born wearing her nationality. She goes on to systematically "strip" herself of "this black veil of a faith," "these lacy silks," "the mangalsutra and the rings," "the skin, the face, the flesh, the womb" (13). Having

stripped herself of these essentializing marks of nationhood, religion, and femininity, she says provocatively:

Let's see
 what I am *in* here

 Let's see
 what I am *out* here,
 making, crafting,
 plotting
 at my new geography" (13; emphasis added).

Dharker takes readers with her through a process in which, even as she strips herself of all subjection, she is tentative and unsure about what she may find, as suggested by the repetition of "let's see." The poem becomes a pedagogic process of discovery for herself and the reader. Since it is a process, we do not see the "after": this is not a defined process, but the definition of a process. It does not have an end but only a beginning and thus constantly remains, in its "making, crafting, / plotting," a (re) creation of the subject in this framework of interrogation.

This is part of a larger self-reflective process whereby Dharker can stand out and create her own geography. Roles prescribed by nation/religion/society no longer give her the surety of a map. She no longer relies on these givens. She needs to redraw her own geography. In other words, she is both the terrain that is to be mapped and the cartographer who maps the terrain. This move to the outside from the within strongly resonates with Hélène Cixous' argument in "The Laugh of the Medusa":

If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, a signifier that always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers. . . . And you will see with what ease she will spring forth from that "within"—the "within" where she once so drowsily crouched—to overflow at the lips she will cover the foam. (268)

The constant plotting and creating of a new geography that Dharker desires is what Cixous would term the leap from “within.” The forces that have historically subjugated women operate not just as the nation, body, and image but also form inside the self. The uncovering of this inner self is a crucial trajectory that Dharker follows in her poetry. Her poetry, therefore, does not simply critique the forces of subjection that seek to keep women within a patriarchal discourse but also exposes the very *formation* of these varied discourses that ingrain themselves as women come to believe in their lack of choice. In other words, then, her poetry exemplifies the creation of that choice through active agency. This recreation of choice—by discarding an older (imposed) system of thought—is done by remaking the self.

How is this new self created? How does it function? Where is it located? One of Dharker’s rhetorical strategies for the creation and development of this new self is evident in the forty-six poems that make up the section “I Speak for the Devil.”² Dharker uses an old (but refashioned) trope of the devil to comment on issues of freedom and agency, to critique the way histories of subversive women and their acts have been condemned, and to plot for herself—and the women depicted in the poems—new selves.

As a representational strategy, the devil is an unstable and fluid trope, and the function of the devil changes according to the subject position of the onlooker. It is used in these poems in three different ways. First, for those who seek to restrict women within prescribed narrow identities, the devil represents all those elements (TV, entertainment, education) which purportedly threaten the cultural and religious purity of women. Anything that attempts to destabilize the maintenance of social-patriarchal order will be viewed as the devil by these regulating authorities—individuals and collectives who arrogate to themselves the role of maintaining the cultural and social status quo. They thus see the need to exorcise this devil.

For Dharker’s poetic subjects, however, the devil represents precisely these cultural and religious nationalisms—and the patriarchal assumptions they feed on—of seeing women only in a fixed sexual role as biological producers or members of a bounded (religious or national)

collective. Dharker points to the need for women to recognize, resist, and exorcise these patriarchal attitudes.

Thirdly, the devil is an agential force through which these same women will subvert forms of domination that have bound them. The devil inhabits the selves of the women and becomes an alter-ego and an agent of the subversive acts for which women are—and have been—condemned by religious and cultural patriarchies. The devil, thus, becomes that convenient (though not simplistic) masterstroke of a strategy through which women may be able to give expression to their dissident wills in complete opposition to prescribed strictures. It is this unstable plurality accorded to the devil, and consequently to exorcism, that will help to flesh out the multi-layered contexts within which these poems work.

The function of reigning in women starts by curtailing their immediate exposure to ideas that are easily labelled as the source of immorality. In their bid to preserve the purity of their women, religious fundamentalists first try to dispose of the TV set. In “Dealing with the devil,”

Arshad said his uncle from Bradford
switched off the TV set one day

.....

dragged it out, smashed the screen
and carted the corpse away
to the dump,

leaving them sitting there,
the world cast out, all chatter *exorcized*,

.....

One devil had been dealt with.

You have to start somewhere,

Arshad's uncle said. (Dharker, *I Speak for the Devil* 95;
emphasis added)

Similarly, in “Object,” men “patrol the streets” to ostensibly safeguard moral behaviour:

The guardians of our need
patrol the streets, fired

with pure passion,
eager to find the flesh
unsealed, frantic
to mete out justice. (108)

In an ironically titled poem, “Saviours,” the poet is blunt about the coming together of religious fundamentalism, patriarchy, and the state:

The defenders of the faith
are devoutly contemplating
currency,
the slide of the rupee,
tumbling stock,
.....
The price of onions has gone up:
the men around the table
decide it is appropriate
to go to war. (80)

When the “guardians of our need” are equated with the “defenders of our faith,” what is subjective (lust) gets conflated with what is political (war, currency). Television and other forms of technology that may taint the purity of women by communicating ideas and images that are inimical to the cultural-social status quo are identified as dangerous and thus need to be exorcized. Patriarchy’s pervasive capillary presence through both individuals and collectives of men constitutes a tightly bound, well-defined discursive, religious, and political system that imposes various forms of violent regulation(s). These positions for men are not only naturalized but are shown to be morally superior through appellations like “guardians,” “saviours,” and “defenders.” The satiric undertone that Dharker adopts is a poetic double-edged sword. While it shows how any form of resistance by women is not even considered a political possibility, it undercuts the aura of complete control by showing the latent insecurities that riddle this discursive network.

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park refer to this intertwined nature of nationalism and religious identity when they write that “[b]

oth theocratic and secular (but multireligious) postcolonial nations have continued to rely upon the idiom of nationalism and religious identity to counter Western neo-imperialism, or to prop up the sectarian claims of the majority community” (63). They go on to identify this collusion as a challenge for feminists in postcolonial nations with “the recourse to secularism, democracy and liberal rights being by no means an uncomplicated alternative, either ideologically or practically” (64).

From within Anglo-American feminism, Sandra Bartky nuances Michel Foucault’s understanding of the production of docile bodies to argue that “[t]he disciplinary power that inscribes femininity on the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (36). This “absence of formally identifiable disciplinarians and of a public schedule of sanctions only disguises the extent to which the imperative to be ‘feminine’ serves the interest of domination” (37). For Dharker it is women who need to be exorcized of the various forms of patriarchy and domination that operate on them externally and internally.

“The djinn in Auntie” serves as an interesting case in point:

One minute she was out there,
screaming and cartwheeling
with the village boys,

.....

The next they said she must sit still
and shut her mouth.

She did it for a while,

right through marriage and a child. (Dharker, *I Speak for the*

Devil 57–58)

From one moment when she is “screaming and cartwheeling / with the village boys” to the next when she must “sit still / and shut her mouth,” the Auntie obeys an anonymous “they” “right through marriage and a child.” This shift marks the restraint imposed on her bodily and enunciative functions. She needs to “still” all her faculties of (bodily and mental) expression at the altar of her social functions as wife and mother. The djinn fills her with “knowledge,” and as a result, “women and men came

in / to hear her from miles around” and “crowds and questions filled the room” (57). Through the djinn, she receives knowledge, which answers all the questions of the people concerned. The nature of this knowledge, though never explained, allows her the social sanction that was otherwise denied to her. As she goes about her daily chores of “oiling the children’s hair, tying their red ribbons,” she warns them to watch out for the djinn, though “secretly she knew / she’d be lost without the thing inside her” (58). Dharker ends the poem with the evocatively powerful lines:

Her mother came from Mirpur,
just like us.
This woman has our look.
Set free, at last.
At last, possessed. (58)

Here Dharker makes two points—one of similarity and another of difference. We are given a genealogy of the woman, and told that she shares “our look,” confirming therefore the social standing of the woman, that she was no different from the rest of “us.” It is because of this similarity, these known social antecedents that are often considered the defining features of an authentic/safe self in society, that the last two lines are illuminated by their difference. The woman whose social history was known and antecedents confirmed, who previously has had no signs or history of possession, is now possessed. The narrator characterizes this possession as being “set free,” even though semantically it is the exact obverse.

Other poems in the collection—such as “Power” (62), “Breeding ground, Chicago” (64), “Learning to speak in Birmingham” (66), and “Being good in Glasgow” (68)—are written as monologues by four different women speakers (Sujata, Christine, Ella, and Farida, respectively). They focus on how the devil enters the lives of these women, who belong to different religions and in diverse geographical locations, and rearranges their thoughts, perspectives, desires, and worldviews. The devil is projected as an invading presence that is responsible for the disruptive acts that these women desire, perform, and reflect on in these diverse geographical sites.

What is the nature of this freedom? We get some glimpses of it through the activities of the women performed in close alliance with the devil. In "All of Us," some women "started laughing and they had to call the Brahmin in" while others "killed a chicken and cooked it with all the feathers on" (60). In the poem "Mary ran naked down the street," and although "Anita never spoke back to her mother-in-law, one day the devil did" (60). What do these activities reveal? Put simply, they mark an excess that disturbs and spills over the boundaries of the so-called ordered self. This order is marked by the boundaries it sets, and the boundaries are drawn by the internalized patriarchal values exercised without choice or agency by these women. The violation of this interior code is made possible by the rhetorical use of the devil. The devil redraws these boundaries, recalibrates the scale on which these interior maps are drawn, and empowers the women to become agents of transgressive actions for which they are not blamed:

We are able to hear each other
now, laughing, screaming,
singing,
with one mouth. (61)

Starkly opposed to the masculinist collective ("they") is the emergence of another feminine counter-collective ("we") which is "laughing, screaming, / singing." This exuberance exemplifies a crucial point about political solidarities: recognizing the need to speak together ("with one mouth") and to one another without homogenizing forms of dissident expression.

Dharker also documents the attempts to reign in, control, and exorcize these women in equally graphic terms in the poem "Power":

After a while they gave up
the electric shocks,
stopped the blood letting,
realized there was nothing
to be gained by burning
hot coals on my skin.

It would take more than that
to make me give you up.

I close the mouth,
to keep the freedom in. (63)

Both these statements—the production of the empowered resistant subjectivity and the patriarchal efforts to reign these women in—are revealing. This conjunction in which the transgressive woman meets the full power of a culture that wants to reign her in may reveal the processes and powers involved in the construction of these oppressed gendered subjects. Wendy Brown discusses “the difficulty of analytically grasping the powers constitutive of subjection” (129).³ She argues that “gender does not exist prior to its regulation. Rather, the gendered subject emerges through a regulatory scheme of gender—we are literally brought into being as gendered subjects through gender regulation” (124). In thematic continuation with Brown, Bartky suggests that “[a]n adequate understanding of women’s oppression will require an appreciation of the extent to which not only women’s lives but their very subjectivities are structured within an ensemble of systematically duplicitous practices” (37).

The question of subjectivity leads one to think about the value and possibility of agency in the lives of Dharker’s poetic subjects. In her overview of the conceptual fortunes of agency in feminist discourse, Lois McNay defines agency as “the capacity of a person (or other material and living entities) to intervene in the world in a manner that is deemed, according to some criterion or another, to be independent or relatively autonomous” (40). She draws attention to the embodied nature of agency, which needs to be understood from the perspective of the individual’s own experience of the world and can never be homogeneous, as in the instances of rebellion by women quoted above. Similarly, Meenakshi Thapan, in her sociological study of women from varying social backgrounds, asserts that “[t]he experience of an embodied and gendered self lies at the intersection not only of multiple subjectivities but also at multiple points of political consciousness and location” (6).

Does agency always manifest as resistance? Or does resistance always serve as an adequate form for agential practices? As Thapan reminds us, sources of resistance emerge from everyday interactions with the world, but “the nature of resistance will vary depending on social position, privilege and status and other assets that serve as markers of inclusion and exclusion” (168). Thus, while the agency exhibited by the women figures in Dharker’s poetry through their dissident actions emerges as a form of resistance, to always expect resistance as a necessary consequence of agency would be a trap.⁴ In other words, the asymmetric forms of resistance that Dharker’s women display—under the influence of the devil—can neither be predicted nor should be read in a decontextualized frame. The formation of resistant subjectivities, thus, need not always be manifest through external actions.⁵

The last poem in Dharker’s *I Speak for the Devil*, “Exorcism,” helps to unravel the many layers of meanings in the collection. The poem finally reveals the identity—and source—of the devil. Up until this poem, the collection suggests that it/she/he is an unsettling *invasive* presence in the lives of the women it possesses. Instead, the presence of the devil is integral to a sense of self:

I’m letting all the bad things
fall away. I’m no one
but myself,
no one possesses me.
The breath coming in
and out of my body
is only mine.
I’m in control of this, I’m doing fine. (127)

This is a radical shift that in many ways pulls the rug out from under a reader’s feet. Dharker creates a deceptively simple and make-believe world, convincing the reader that the devil has become part of the women against their will or at least without their agency. For Patke, “[t]he book ends on the recognition that poetry works as a form of exorcism” (*Postcolonial Poetry* 189). However, I argue that there is more than

just a metatextual reference at work here. The devil becomes, as I note above, part of an oppositional dialectic through which Dharker makes a point about women's lack of agency. Dharker makes this lack explicit by highlighting the fact that these women allow themselves to be possessed and taken control of and are unable to withstand the onslaught of both patriarchy and the devil. Possession becomes a gesture of weakness. However, Dharker levels the playing field on both sides. On the one hand, women who are supposedly weak internalize the patriarchal order (since they apparently need it), and on the other hand, this weakness also suggests women's susceptibility to this emancipatory force—the devil. Following from this, the prescriptive logic of patriarchy dictates that since women have been weak enough to become victims of the devil, they need to be, in turn, exorcized by the patriarchal order.

At this crucial juncture in my analysis, I would like to highlight the strong resonance of mimicry. Luce Irigaray argues that in the first phase of reclaiming feminine agency, “there is perhaps only one path, and in any case it is one to which the female condition is assigned: that of *mimicry*. But the mimetic role itself is complex, for it presupposes that one can lend oneself to everything, if not to everyone. That one can *copy* anything at all, anyone at all, can receive all impressions, *without appropriating them to oneself*, and *without adding any*” (208; emphasis added). Dharker uses mimicry as a tool: initially she appears to use the invasive presence of the devil as a counter-argument to her main argument. The revelation in “Exorcism” that the poem's woman-figure is in fact not possessed plays on the many meanings of exorcism that Dharker has created internally in and through her poems. On the one hand, the devil represents the values, boundaries, and ways of being that are imposed on women. Having mimicked the oppressive strategy of patriarchal cultures to get the reader to believe that women have no choice, she then shows that women need to exorcize themselves—to de-internalize the various identities, hierarchies, and boundaries that bind them. It is in the process of exorcizing this devil that women will really be able to understand the meaning of being free—free of any imposed identities, pressures, and dictates. In other words, this is the dramatization of the birth of a political subject.

In the last poem in *I Speak for the Devil*, “Exorcism,” she writes:

You won't find me in Sialkot
 being someone's daughter.

 You won't find me in Glasgow
 being someone's nightmare. (Dharker 127)

Dharker rejects the places (Sialkot, London), familial relationships (wife, sister, etc.), and spectral possibilities (nightmare, devil, fantasy) through which the identities of women are generally subsumed/consumed. Her poetic subject is “dancing on cans and champagne bottles rolling round the street / Flying my feet, over the rattle and clunk / where the drums thump thump” (128). Through these productively unstable actions—like dancing and rolling—she is literally and figuratively eliding every ideological or cultural attempt at appropriation: “We are taking a chunk out of a new song, / On the move/swirling, falling. / This is how we belong” (127–28). The visual alliterative image of constant movement (“On the move/swirling, falling”), when matched by the onomatopoeic emphasis (“thump thump”), makes clear that self-definition is a constant process of resistance.

In her multi-layered intersectional analysis of globalization, nationalism, tradition, and modernity in postcolonial India, Nivedita Menon persuasively argues that “the outer space that feminism seeks to define will have to be marked by the continual refusal of choice—between tradition and modernity, between universal rights and cultural specificities, between individual uniqueness and community identity, between capitalist consumerism and the demonization of desire” (226). “Exorcism” demonstrates precisely this “continual refusal of choice.” If, as Bartky argues, “[t]he disciplinary techniques through which the ‘docile bodies’ of women are constructed aim at a regulation that is perpetual and exhaustive” (41), for Dharker resistance, too, needs to be “perpetual and exhaustive,” enacted through a constant, critical, and self-reflective awareness. In postcolonial contexts the function of resistance, as Thapan argues, “pose[s] the question for the future, as an openness rather than inevitability or closure, filled with meaning and promise for an unknown

and emergent future” (172). This future-oriented, resistant, heuristic, productive instability is needed to define the feminine political subject.

III. State Surveillance, Religion, and Identity Formation

Dharker’s poems “These are the times we live in” I, II, and III, which form a triptych in *The Terrorist at My Table*,⁶ provide another perspective on the poet’s critique of belonging. In these poems, Dharker explores the question of identity formation from the outside. Speaking of contemporaneous issues like the War on Terrorism unleashed by the United States, she writes:

You hand over your passport. He
looks at your face and starts
reading you backwards from the last page.
.....
You shrink to the size
of the book in his hand.
.....
In front of you,
he flicks to the photograph,
and looks at you suspiciously. (Dharker, *Terrorist* 45)

The interior and continuous process of identity formation that Dharker attempts to establish in the poems I analyse above seems at risk of erasure here, as this very process is inverted. Identity here is not created by the self but imposed from the outside. The experience of airports testifies to how the poet’s identity is not for her to establish but is formed by the relevant authorities who use specific documents, such as passports. In other words, as Dharker points out, we are not who we pretend to be and are deemed suspicious until our passports and photographs attest to our identities. What is of concern for purposes of identification is not the laboriously crafted inner self but the outer surface documented by the photograph.

In her discussion of Jackie Kay’s verse autobiography *Adoption Papers* (1991), Valerie Popp refers to a similar conundrum of identity formation in which identity is marked by an excess of signification that cannot

be contained by state-sponsored forms of legibility like passports. As Popp argues, “passports firmly deny cultural hybridity; they force us into gender binaries; they affirm the idea that identity must have an origin in time and space; and they reduce us to state-produced images by freezing our bodies in photo form” (293). The reductions into which identities are frozen and captured are multiply delimiting. Towards the end of “These are the times we live in I,” Dharker similarly questions whether the photograph can represent the person:

And all that's left is his look of surprise,
because you don't match your photograph.
Even that is coming apart.
The pieces are there
but they missed out your heart. (Dharker, *Terrorist* 45–46)

If the interiority of the person is represented by the “heart,” then in the logic of the state it does not matter.

In “These are the times we live in II,” Dharker suggests a way out of this conundrum: “I’m nobody, you must say” (47). Instead of an assertion of identity, it is its negation that she asserts as she goes on to say, “I don’t belong inside your cage of coverage” (47).

In the third poem of the triptych, “These are the times we live in III,” Dharker writes:

They got an eraser as big as your house
and they began to use it to delete your life,
the names of your lanes and roads and streets,
your stories and your histories,
your lullabies. They rubbed
out your truth, and they left in your lies. (49)

This effacement of the self is how the state deals with those it considers suspicious. The erasure of lives and the insertion of manufactured narratives that are not one’s own happen as easily as erasing an error on paper. The state leaves in the “lies,” which suit the political regime’s ideological agenda. These “lies” are magnified by the media and consumed by the public. This ensures a slow but significant shift in the public’s perception

of individuals or communities that the state views suspiciously, thus furthering the state's agenda of normalizing the "lies." This is how new identities are constructed and naturalized, and Dharker explores the impossibility of inhabiting these constructed identities.⁷

These poems are also accompanied by drawings that complement Dharker's verbal critique. All three images (on pages 44, 46, and 48) use newsprint as a background on which to construct the woman's face. In each, interestingly, the face is incomplete, which suggests that neither the photograph nor the newsprint, by themselves, can comprehensively represent the interiority of the subject since they follow the "image's logic of abbreviation" (Axel 422). The images break any easy one-to-one mapping that is the function of the photograph in relation to the face in a document like the passport. It is unclear, from the use of different kinds of news reports of terrorist attacks on the newsprint that makes up the main text for the sketch, whether the print is supposed to be the foreground or a background for the features of the face, or, even more interestingly, whether the print itself causes the distorted facial features. In his reading of Dharker's poetry as an experimental poetics, Menozzi writes that

[t]he insertion of drawings alongside the poems dismantles and dismembers the unity of the visual poem by showing that verbal elements—words—and visual elements—lines—are exchangeable parts of a plural assemblage resisting full integration. The drawings fracture and extend the poems. Instead of unity and self-containment, Dharker's works testify to a de-structured space of figural expression traversed by lines of flight and libidinal economies that are irreducible to the textual element. (168)

In the first drawing (Dharker, *Terrorist* 44), the prominent black smudge literally tars the blankness of the face. The face is shot through with grainy newsprint, inchoate and undefined. The newsprint itself can be read only when looking closely at the sketch, an action which mimics and, by extension, subverts attempts to ascertain the identity of a person in an official document, such as a passport photograph. The content of

the newsprint is a scathing critique of how the capture of terrorists was shown on television. If a sketch is supposed to be a resemblance of a person, then in Dharker's drawing that resemblance is negated. Identity is no longer represented by the sketch or the photograph but is framed and shaped by the media. The image revealed—through words—is of a person thought to be a terrorist viewed with intense suspicion. Dharker shows that prejudice is inherent to the formation of the image itself. Judgment has already been passed by the media and its publics without awaiting a formal trial.

The second drawing (46) is also incomplete in many ways. Not only does it show a partial view of a person's face, the veiled figure is represented in profile staring into blackness "in terror." The written text that forms part of the face is taken from news clippings in which people who have survived or witnessed alleged terrorists being taken into custody narrate (in first person) their versions of the experience. The newsprint signifies two possibilities: either it purposely masks the identity of the terrorist, or it strips away the identity of the person altogether. Yet, at the same time, the identity of the alleged terrorists is narrated collectively by the survivors.

The third drawing (48) is the most interesting. The text provocatively embedded in the drawing asks viewers to "see through the writing" and "look through the image" (48), thus posing a challenge to the reader/viewer to go beyond the essentialized limits set by the state and the media. The contrast between a photograph on a passport, for instance, and this drawing is worth commenting on. The drawing asks the reader to "look through the image"—while self-consciously making it difficult for the reader to do so—indicating that there is something waiting to be revealed. This differs from the purpose of the photograph on a passport, where there is no need to "see through" or go beyond what the exterior reveals. While the face in Dharker's drawing is discernible, the identity of the person is not readily available: the eyes are mostly blackened and only one eye is partially visible. The nose, lips, and neck are also partially visible. The face is constructed using written text, and a section of the face is blank, as though someone has run as eraser through it. The content of the text is unlike the other two

drawings: it is suggestive of an academic article or a government policy document commenting on the conditions of Islam in Britain. The tone it assumes is detached and coldly dispassionate. The apparent desire for betterment that it seems to express is couched in a legalese that is exhaustingly alienating.

What Dharker critiques through these poems and drawings are the culture, processes, and technologies of surveillance that are shaping, modifying, and rupturing forms of embodiment and subjectivity post-9/11 and 7/7. As Tahir Abbas argues, “[a]fter 9/11 and 7/7, multiculturalism has been reduced to a security agenda that isolates Muslims and immigrant groups. The issue is that Muslims are treated as a racial group, where religion is replaced as the defining characteristic of racism” (36). For David Lyon and Kevin Haggerty, the “security-surveillance-industrial complex [that] was empowered by 9/11” is guided by—and spreads—fear (292). As surveillance becomes part of the architecture of everyday life, “a pre-crime logic of security” (293) comes into force through which civil liberties are curtailed and suspicion is constantly manufactured.

From a gendered perspective, surveillance not only “reinforce[s] sexual norms by creating pressures for self-regulation,” as Hille Koskela perceptively suggests (49), but the apparently objective insights about people that surveillance data produce flatten out the density of subjectivity since they are a “highly circumscribed vision of reality, where social contact is reduced to the visual” (51). Dharker’s work achieves a fractured luminosity that shines through when read from within this gap that is generated between the flattened viscosity of a photograph on a passport and a subjectivity that is misconstrued by the state and its surveillance apparatus.

The securitization of Muslims that has occurred post-9/11 has impacted how they are treated in spaces like airports in particular and in society in general.⁸ Many critics discuss the airport as a fraught space where suspicions are heightened, racial profiling is rampant, and people are falsely accused/detained/harassed for having certain names, bodily features, or gestures (Blackwood; Jamil; Salter). The resistance of

Dharker's poetic subjects by asserting "I don't belong inside your cage of coverage" (47) is an attempt to deny the state and its formations the power to define the Muslim woman in reductionist and essentialist terms. The question that remains, however, is to what extent can the Muslim woman resist the typification that the agencies of the state use to fix her identity?

IV. Conclusion

Dharker uses poetry to offer a stinging critique of the imbrication of gender, politics, religion, and the state by unsettling hierarchies that seek to contain and define belonging. She harnesses the political function of poetry by questioning identity formation in multiple ways. Being an outsider allows her the flexibility to articulate and define herself in ways that are not circumscribed. It is this model of power that she envisages for women in her poetry. As I argue in the second section of my essay, she challenges women to resist the internalization of patriarchy just as much as she denounces those people and formations of thought that enforce, regulate, and normalize patriarchal assumptions.

In the poems I discuss from *The Terrorist at My Table*, in the third section of this essay, Dharker interrogates citizenship by purposefully breaking the bounds of mono-national poetry. Through the liminal space of an airport, she makes visible the cracks and gaps in the ideal of a uniform and homogenous citizenship. The Muslim woman has to deal with layers of invisible prejudice—Islamophobia, the surveillance state, and a patriarchal gaze—before she is able to exercise the privilege of self-determination. To arrive at the border as an unmarked citizen who is free to define herself from within and without is the deferred ideal that Dharker gestures towards.

Her poetry—alongside her drawings—create a visual/textual fabric that sharpens her critique of gendered citizenship in an unevenly globalized world. She foregrounds an intersectional understanding of the politics of gender as crisscrossed by state surveillance, social and political pressures to be global, and the pervasively corroding presence of Islamophobia. Through her poetry, Dharker manifests the challenges

and the potential inherent in the struggle for definitions of personal, public, and collective selfhoods.

Notes

- 1 Dharker's oeuvre is vast and spans many genres. She is the author of seven poetry collections: *Purdah and Other Poems* (1988); *Postcards from god* (1997); *I Speak for the Devil*; *The Terrorist at My Table*; *Leaving Fingerprints*; *Over the Moon* (2014); and *Luck Is the Hook* (2018). She is also a documentary filmmaker. One of her documentaries won the Silver Lotus Award for the best short film in 1980. She is also an artist who has exhibited her work in India and abroad.
- 2 *I Speak for the Devil* has three sections under which the poems are organized: "They'll say, 'She Must be from another country'" (seventeen poems, pp. 12–40); "The Broken Umbrella" (ten poems, pp. 42–55); and "I Speak for the Devil" (forty-six poems, pp. 57–128).
- 3 An excellent example of a poem that exposes the internalization of patriarchal categories—and demonstrates Dharker's skill as a satirist—is "The mark of a wife" in *Leaving Fingerprints*, p. 82. Space constraints do not allow me to discuss this poem in detail here.
- 4 Chanda similarly argues that material and socio-economic contexts decide the ways, forms, and actions through which women may express varying forms of resistance (499).
- 5 Mahmood's discussion of the question of agency for women in non-Western societies bears recall in this context. She makes the important argument that agency does not always have to be subversive to be recognized as such.
- 6 *The Terrorist at My Table* is divided into three parts: "The Terrorist at My Table," "The Habit of Departure," and "Worldwide Rickshaw Ride." Only the first section is further subdivided into four sub-sections: (i) "The terrorist at my table"; (ii) "These are the times we live in"; (iii) "Lascar Johnnie 1930"; and (iv) "Remember Andalus." In this essay, I principally deal with poems from the second sub-section of the first part.
- 7 Enormously suggestive in this context of framing identities is a poem like "The Right Word," in which Dharker enacts a struggle to find the right word to define a terrorist. Depending on the subject position of the onlooker, the affective affiliations used can be fluid and changeable. For instance, if for some s/he is a "terrorist," for others s/he could be a "freedom-fighter," a "martyr," a "guerilla warrior," or "a child who looks like mine" who could be invited to "come eat with us" (Dharker, *Terrorist* 25–26).
- 8 As Saeed argues, securitization intersects with Islamophobia and is used against the Muslim woman, creating a constant sense of paranoia and fear: "Muslim women in Britain have become securitized as an oxymoronic threat that is hidden in plain sight" (78).

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