
Breaking Boundaries: Gender, Identity and Resistance in the Poetry of Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker

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Abstract

Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker are the two most popular and accomplished poets of the twentieth century. They won critical acclaim as their poetry drew the attention of so many critics and scholars. They have analyzed their poetry from various perspectives. The exploration of their poetry reveals a despairing world in which the dark forces of life threaten to destroy any vestiges of redemption. Imtiaz Dharker and Kamala Das convey their complex states of mind. That is why there is a great deal of inner landscape in their works. In their writing they use various objects of nature as objective correlatives for their mental feelings. The use of this technique gives an aura of fresh air to the world of their poetry, which is mostly obsessed with anguish and anxiety. Their works thematic their personal suffering, humiliation, betrayal, psychological breakdowns, debauchery and feminine oppression. Inherently nihilistic, their poetry is an attempt to evolve a symbolic order out of chaos. Inequalities have existed since the dawn of civilization and women have been fighting against all sorts of discriminations: legal, economic, religious and social. The various factors responsible for their suppression were misogyny, romantic glorification and patriarchy. Irrationally romanticized, they were not allowed to play a significant role as independent, self confident individuals. This was compounded by other unjust social, political and biological factors which produced a rationale or opposition to their rights. As a consequence, they did not enjoy a comfortable position in society. This Research Paper is a comparative study between Imtiaz Dharker and Kamala Das. It is entitled "Breaking Boundaries: Gender, Identity and Resistance in the Poetry of Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker".

Keywords: Identity, Anxiety, Suppression, Imtiaz Dharker, Kamala Das

Sylvia Plath experienced the world as an arena of various power struggles: life against death, victor against victim, male against female. Her poems as well as the only novel *The Bell Jar* she wrote can be seen as attempts to mediate these antagonisms. She felt life as a chaos of conflicting oppositions and counter forces and tried to co-ordinate these counter forces by corresponding to her art and life. Thus Plath's own inner and outer life provided not only form, but also matter for her writing. She wrote about her own emotions and about actual events, places and people. In turn, her

writing shaped her life; her fictive metaphors provided temporary states to the “*chaos of conflicting oppositions*” and thus structured her experience. A strong feeling of her own independence, rebellion against male domination, resentment and protest against male domination, resentment and protest against women who were passively perpetuating the human values and mindless domesticity are freely expressed in all her works. In a male-dominated society she sought to establish her identity as a woman and an outstanding writer. The quest for identity becomes the main theme in her short novel *The Bell Jar*, and in almost all her poems. She extends her range to comprehend the social and cultural history of the West in her poems such as *Fever 1030*, *Daddy*, *Lady Lazarus*, *Death and Co*, *Cut*, *Mary's Songs*, *Tulips*, *The Moon and the Yew Tree*, etc.

Like other woman writers, marriage and family life made it difficult for Plath to realize potential. Although she was conscious that writing and family life do not go together, yet she remained determined to indulge in both. In this connection Judith Kroll's remark about her is significant:

She was Earth Mother and the fruits of her body and fruits of her mind were inextricably intertwined.

Suzanne Juhsaz elaborates this further:

Plath is the women poet of our century who sees the problem, the situation of trying to be a woman poet of our century who sees the problem, the situation of trying to be a woman poet with the coldest and most undedreedeeming clarity, and whofinds no solution.

Kamala Das was nurtured in an atmosphere of poetry. Poetry came to her effortlessly and in later life she had only to decide the medium of its expression. She is a bilingual writer. Apart from her poems in English she has also published a number of short stories in Malayalam known for their provocative themes and crisp, enchanting style. She started writing poetry at the age of six. Her first poem was, as we gather from *My Story*, about a doll that had lost its head and had to remain headless for eternity. She believes that just as God leaves a 'potent fragment' of himself in his creation so does the poet. This potent fragment of the poet represents his personality. This is why, in *My Story* Das asserts that: 'A poet's raw material is not stone or clay but her own personality.'

Imtiaz Dharker is one among these poets, who register their voice against sexism, violence, religion exploitation etc. She was born in Pakistan and brought up in Scotland, and she divides her time between London and India and writes for the cause of females of Indian subcontinent. There are different themes of her poetry of Imtiaz Dharker such as: home, freedom, journeys, geographical and cultural displacement, communal conflict, religious exploitation and gender politics etc. In the realms of the Post-Modern literature Imtiaz Dharker occupy a very significant position as a rebel against the tradition of marginalization of women in Indian subcontinent society. She is widely acclaimed as revolutionary poet for having raised in poetry her voice rebelliously against cultural displacement, communal conflict, religious exploitation and gender politics which is the causal factor of feminine disturbance. In order to awaken the idealistic women from their age-old slumber, she started writing poetry and her poetry protests against the injustices and the persecution to which pious women have long been subjected in the name of religion, even though which is not mentioned in religious books. She protests against the passivity and the timidity of the pious religious women who spends her life silently in the false religious society. She makes poetry as a vehicle for the expression of her resentments and indignation against such false religious society. She is a contemporary Indian poetess quite conscious of her artistic design and purpose as well as her responsibility towards the hopes and oppressions, the concerns and anguishes, of womankind. Her poetic voice imbued with feminist angst and anxiety sensibility is typically her own and it cannot be confused with anyone else's. She experienced the world as an arena of various power struggles: false religion against female, victor against victim, male against female, master against

servant. Her poems as well as the drawings can be seen as an attempt to mediate these antagonisms. She felt life as a chaos of conflicting oppositions and counter forces and tried to co-ordinate these counter forces by corresponding to her art and life. Thus Dharker's own inner and outer life provided not only form, but also matter for her writing. She wrote about her own emotions and about actual events, places and people of three countries i.e. Pakistan, India and UK. In turn, her writing shaped her life; her metaphors provided temporary states to her diaspora life and thus structured her experience. A strong feeling of her own independence, rebellion against male domination, also resentment and protest against male domination, resentment and protest against women who were passively perpetuating the human values and mindless domesticity are freely expressed in all her works. In a male-dominated society she sought to establish her identity as a woman and an outstanding writer. The quest for identity becomes the main theme in almost all her poems. She extends her range to comprehend the social and cultural history of the West in her poem "Over the Moon". Like other woman writers, marriage and family life made it difficult for Dharker to realize potential. Although she was conscious that writing and family life do not go together, yet she remained determined to indulge in both. She divides her time between London and India. She eloped to marry Indian, Maharashtrian Hindu who lives in Bombay and was a journalist, Anil Dharker, a Hindu by birth. Because of that, her family completely cut her off and she did not see or hear from them for the next fifteen years (Dharker in de Souza 1999, 112). After the death of her first husband Anil Dharker, she married with Simon Powell. At present time she divides her time between the United Kingdom and Mumbai. She habitually describes herself as a Scottish Muslim Calvinist, born in Lahore and adopted by India. It is this feminine experience that experiences her poetry and drawings.

The way Imtiaz Dharker addresses about the dilemma of subaltern women in oppressing societies remembers the opinion made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?". It can be argued, though, that one difference between Spivak's opinion on the silencing of the gendered subaltern and Imtiaz Dharker's point of view on the same theme is that the latter is not as gloomy, in spite of what it might seem at first sight. In her poetry, Imtiaz Dharker offers some examples of women who manage to break free and speak up for themselves, or of women who find a way to speak, for example in the form of the possessed women of *I speak for the devil*. According to the poet, this is one of the strategies used by women to discover a tone of voice in circumstances of repression, even if that entails giving up their own voice – and thus their private agency – in favour of what the others consider to be the devil's voice. In "I need", a poem from "The terrorist at my table", there is a sort of counterpoint to bleak poems like the aforementioned "Another woman", where the speaker wants to see a young boy bathing at the well, and boldly says:

I need to go to Crawford Market
through the piles of fruit
and buy a whole sack
of ripe mangoes
to suck and suck

till nothing is left but dry seeds (Dharker: *The terrorist at my table*, 104).

The poem ends with a mysterious "I need you to come back" (ibid), where longing for what seems to be a lover is mingled with the flavours from both Britain and of her other country, Pakistan. The speaker longs to eat 'sarson da saag, and hot makki di roti', but also bacon and eggs, claiming that "my greed has no nationality" (*The terrorist at my table*, 103). The last poem of *I speak for the devil*, "Exorcism", is a type of freedom, nearly a liberating moment, where the persona tries to get free from the idea of being haunted:

I'm letting all the bad things
fall away. I'm no one
but myself,

no one possesses me. (Dharker: I speak for the devil, 119)

Imtiyaz Dharker and Kamala Das experienced the world as an arena of various power struggles: life against death, victor against victim, male against female. Their poems as well as other fictions they wrote can be seen as attempts to mediate these antagonisms. They felt life as a chaos of conflicting oppositions and counter forces and tried to co-ordinate these counter forces by corresponding to their art and life. Thus their own inner and outer life provided not only form, but also matter for her fiction. She wrote about her own emotions and about actual events, places and people. In turn, their writing shaped their life. A strong feeling of their own independence, rebellion against male domination, resentment and protest against male domination, resentment and protest against women who were passively perpetuating the human values and mindless domesticity are freely expressed in all their works. In a male-dominated society there sought to establish their identity as women and outstanding writers.

Like other women writers, marriage and family life made it difficult for both Dharker and Das to realize potential. Although they were conscious that writing and family life do not go together, yet they remained determined to indulge in both. Their poetry is indeed a complex affair but what is now undisputed is the authenticity of the poems, which in their rich and torturing ambiguities, suggest a daring new aesthetic. They sprang directly from a struggle with the soul-shattering experiences of real life, concerning father, mother, children, husband, grandmother, marriage inner demon, existential burden, human suffering and what not. Viewed as a whole their poems are mainly concerned with themselves. They provide keen insight into their fear, **anguish, anxiety** compulsion, and obsession. Their poetry is therefore self-centered, autobiographical and confessional.

In both Kamala Das and Imtiyaz Dharker **anguish and anxiety** are more important in the sense that right from their childhood both of them has a very sensitive soul. They were very anxious about the things and they got some blows throughout their life, which added to their anxiety and this anxiety forced them to groan with agony. Both these intensely unhappy women are in search of happiness. Kamala Das, like Sylvia Plath spend in her life in the **anguish and anxiety**. Firstly, her careless parents, then, her early marriage to a relative as punishment for not doing well in mathematics, her own and her husband's infidelity, all lead her to loneliness. She was a victim of circumstances and sexual humiliations. All her quests for true love failed. She found herself in a custom ridden, orthodox society dominated by men who looked different and acted different. She could not adjust herself to this situation and, therefore, she highlighted the anguish and anxiety of her mind through her poems. According to her, modern women need freedom, self respect and they are prepared to shoulder responsibility. So, both these women had failed relationships with their male partners, who resulted in increased sensitivity and so show an aversion to the male principle of dominance and subjection. They scorn hypocrisy and are painfully aware of their dominance and sexual subjection. This is the reason that they write about death, disease, and destruction. The poetry of both these poets portrays death as dreadful, but their general approach towards it is a positive one. For them, death not only destroys all forms of the false self but also becomes a means of self-generation and rebirth into a new existence. Life for both these poets is different. It's more challenging for Dharker nwho wants everything, but for Das, after loneliness and longing, it provides her with the anchor of her devotion to Lord Krishna. In the case of Sylvia Plath the constant restlessness and several hurts that haunted her world, led her to commit suicide, but forces of spirituality pulled Kamala Das to live.

In order to awaken the Indian women from their age-old slumber, Kamala Das started writing poetry and her autobiography 'My Story'. This is a revolutionary approach with a feminist perspective. She has dealt with all those problems confronting the patriarchal society of India. In an interview, Kamala Das stated frankly, the purpose of her writing *My Story*:

*I needed to disturb society out of its complacency.
I found the complacency a very ugly state. I wanted
to make women of my generation feel that if men could*

do something wrong, they could do it themselves too.

I wanted them to realize that they were equal,

I wanted to remove gender difference.

Kamala Das's poetry protests against the injustices and the persecution to which women in India have long been subjected to. She protests against the passivity and the timidity of the Indian women and against their subservience to their husbands. In the sixties, when Kamala Das started writing, the Indian women had hardly any voice in society. Kamala recognized herself as one of the victims of the prevalent orthodox attitude towards the Indian women and of male domination. Her husband's ill-treatment of her and his cruel neglect of her feminine needs prompted her to give vent to her grievances in her poems. She makes poetry a vehicle for the expression of her resentments and indignation. The narrators in her poems assert their feminine identity as a neglected class of Indian society. Her poems have ushered in a new kind of morality where the time-honoured virtues of timidity, submissiveness, and dependence are thrown overboard. In this new morality, women speak authoritatively and aggressively, trying to demolish the concept of male dominance and male egotism. Her poetry is largely devoted to her candid confessions of her sex-life. She unhesitatingly and fearlessly employs certain shocking expressions which even a male writer would be reluctant to use. She records her personal concerns and predicament in her poems. There is nothing ugly and forbidden for her. She is the only woman poet of India who has attained world-wide recognition. In her poetry, the theme of body is related to her perennial theme of love. Her attitude to her own body is ambivalent: she both likes and dislikes her body.

In short, in their poetry Imtiaz Dharker and Kamala Das conveys their complex states of mind. That is why there is a great deal of inner landscape in their poems. In their poetry they use various objects of nature as objective correlatives for their mental feelings. The use of this technique gives an aura of fresh air to the world of their poetry, which is mostly obsessed with anguish and anxiety. This technique of reminiscence and projecting the inner or mental landscape into the external landscape shows that their poetry is subliminal and cerebral in nature. Though this makes their poetry somewhat esoteric and obscure on one hand but on the other it gives it a fascinating resonance. Thus, a study of their poetry leads us to recognize their significant role as a rebel for her selfless dedication to the struggle against women's marginalization and victimization. Their literary venture was deliberately and whole heartedly designed for women's emancipation, upliftment and empowerment. Their writings can be conclusively reckoned as feminist in theme, design and tone.

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