

# Transmedial Approach to the Poems of Imtiaz Dharker

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## Abstract:

Imtiaz Dharker is a poet, artist and documentary film-maker who divides her time between London and India. This mixed heritage and itinerant lifestyle is at the heart of her writing: questioning, imagistic and richly textured poems that span geographical and cultural dislocation, conflict and gender politics, while also interrogating received ideas about home, freedom and faith. Imtiaz Dharker highlights Muslim women who are faced with the forces of religious and cultural conservatism. The poet exposes the external suffering of women fraught within the bonds of conventional society. Women are portrayed as a social outcast, symbolically one with a hunch on her back due to constant stooping. Imtiaz is courageous and leaves an ineffaceable stamp of herself as a poet. The convergence of different media to express strong emotions, which is termed as ‘transmediality’ in the recent studies has become more important in recent years due to easy access to different kinds of media and the lowered costs of media productions. Such an approach offers up interesting perspectives on the work of Imtiaz Dharker, a poet, documentary film maker and visual artist, who illustrates her poetry collections with her own drawings, which “form an integral part of her books”.

**Keywords:** transmedial plane, convergence of different media, transmediality, intertextuality, intermedial exchange, transgression, meta-medial whole, digital convergence, precarious curvatures, shifting perspectives.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Imtiaz Dharker is a truly global poet, whose work speaks plainly and with great emotional intelligence to anyone who has ever felt adrift in the increasingly complex, multicultural and shrinking world we inhabit. For a number of years now, her poems have been taught on the UK national curriculum. Right from ‘Speech Balloon’, which energetically opens this Archive recording, charting the spread of a phrase from one culture to another, one can experience Dharker’s restless search for meaning and identity.

This research article deals with transmedial interaction between the poetry and drawings by Imtiaz Dharker. The focus is on the pencil sketches of the poet which represent the emotions expressed in her poetry. Imtiaz Dharker adopts a different medium which can express more than what she realizes in the written words, which works on a transmedial plane.

The convergence of different media to express strong emotions, which is termed as ‘transmediality’ in the recent studies has become more important in recent years due to easy access to different kinds of media and the lowered costs of media productions. Marsha Kinder (1997) was one of the first to

acknowledge transmedia, or as she calls it, transmedia intertextuality. The study of transmediality has been a new trend in German Literary and Cultural Studies in recent years. Whereas intermediality is concerned with the exchange between clearly demarcated media entities and with the boundaries that remain intact in the intermedial exchange, the focus of transmediality lies on the transgression of boundaries between media. The main interest of this approach is in the effect a transmedial exchange has on the participating media in the process of transgression. Instead, in a transmedial process a “dialogue occurs between [the different] media [involved] and a meta-medial level develops”. Thus, if a work of art consists of different media that interact in a transmedial way, the boundaries between these media do not remain intact but are transgressed in such a way that the media involved cannot be examined separately in an analysis of this work of art. On the contrary, the process of transfer of meanings between the separate media is crucial for the interpretation since the mutual exchange between the different media is at the heart of such a work of art. The interaction of its different parts, i.e. the different media it consists of, accordingly creates a meta-medial whole.

Such an approach offers up interesting perspectives on the work of Imtiaz Dharker, a poet, documentary film maker and visual artist, who illustrates her poetry collections with her own drawings, which “form an integral part of her books”. Dharker has often expressed that there is a mutual influence between the different art forms she employs. Poems and drawings can thus not be analyzed separately but need to be approached transmedially since only the interplay between these two media will convey the complex meaning in Dharker’s art. As David Langdon says:

An imaginary, or constructed, world can range from a complex allegory utilized within a rhetorical argument such as Plato's Atlantis or Thomas More's Utopia, or they may be little more than a children's toy. But all imaginary worlds possess one thing in common: all have been definitively created by human, knowable intelligence, utilizing tools that can be described, replicated, and, in turn, studied. (Langdon 17)

In this phase, an effort is made to read the lines of Imtiaz Dharker’s verse and sketches which works on a transmedial plane. According to Chandra K Narayan, “Imtiaz Dharker is almost alone among her peers in having a highly sophisticated sense of line – in poems and sketches. She is good at both. The drawings that accompany most of her poems are designed to better understand the poem .It urges us to read the sketches and scan the poems”.

Dharker draws black and white sketches. The sketches or the line drawn impregnates the written line with multiple contextual interpretations that inevitably vary with those paths that trace a certain line, a certain pattern, paradoxically. Dharker herself says that “everything starts with the image. Sometimes as the line of a poem, sometimes as something I see as a visual, a drawing. No that is not always true: sometimes a poem can start with an idea and that can in turn spark off a drawing.”Ranjit Hoskote calls:“a line as Imtiaz Dharker’s sole weapon in a zone of assault and Dharker has used this weapon very craftily in both the mediums of art related to her. She has emphasized that art has a function in our lives and it should not be remote and esoteric. Art is not just something to store in a shelf, but something people use to enrich their world and their perceptions”. (Hoskote 27)



**Fig. 1. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: [imtiazdharker.com](http://imtiazdharker.com))**

The study of her art accompanied with the poems will attempt a transmedial analysis of Dharker's art to show that it does not offer black-and-white decisions or answers but that its only colours are shades of grey. Figure 1 represents the collection, *Purdah and other poems* (1988), where Imtiaz Dharker powerfully spells out the socialization of women and their own acceptance of gendered cultural norms. Here, she unfolds the multiple facets of the women behind the veil. *Purdah* is an obligatory part of women's dress in Islam. Dharker finds different meanings of *Purdah* at different junctures and in various contexts. As Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* says that "it is better to be locked out than to be locked in", Dharker sensitizes women that, by telling the women to be in *Purdah*, men not only lock them out of the patriarchal society and its functions but also lock them in the boundaries created for them. In her poem "*Purdah 1*", the image created in the mind through verse is that of a young muslim girl who is asked by others to learn some shame. The girl is given a subjective position where society is acting upon her. Though *Purdah* is a place where body finds a place to hide, at the same time she compares the touch of *Purdah* on the girl's body to earth falling on a coffin. *Purdah*, therefore brings with it a deadly silence. This death can be of the identity of the individual behind the *Purdah*, or it can also allude to the deathly silence with which a girl has to accept the social and traditional norms set for her. When someone is behind *Purdah*, people who were known earlier, "make different angles in the light, their eyes aslant". Moreover, *Purdah* makes the women carry "between the thighs, a sense of sin". This sin, on a primary level, is the sin of the conditions amid which a young girl grows in society. It can also be interpreted as a kind of burden that age old futile practices put on an individual or the religious, moral and social taboos, which a spirited young woman would like to break.

Initially, in the poem, the cloth that fans out against the skin, grows closer to the skin towards the middle of the poem. Here, Dharker shows that how gradually women become accustomed to the veil and start accepting it as a part of their own being. When *Purdah* is seen as safety, we may also take it to symbolize a vantage point for women from where she can observe the world, be a part of it and yet remain hidden. Thus, there is an ambivalent acceptance of *Purdah*. This security found in *Purdah* is echoed in other poem by Dharker i.e. "*Going Home*", where an adolescent girl asks her mother to put her in *Purdah* to avoid the gaze of men. She says "mummy put me in *purdah*, quick or he'll see".

Moreover, at the end of the poem, "the doors keep opening inward and inward" to symbolize the depth of women's experience. Also, opening of doors may refer to a revelation or perhaps a search for something. These meanings and readings of poem are enhanced with the drawing that accompanies the poem. The first and the most obvious uncertainty that arises is the fact that the woman here (in the sketch) is not in *Purdah*. Here, Dharker has shown what is hidden from the world. The question that comes to our mind is that, is this reality hidden from us? Does every woman feel the same pain that is shown on the face of the woman in sketch? If it's true, then why is *Purdah* called a safety? We notice a ghostly image of a woman which reminds us of the "coffin" and "the deathly silence." The eyes of the woman are dark. This is a common feature of almost all of Dharker's sketches. She either doesn't draw

eyes or covers them to suggest that the vision held is grim and dark. There's no light or hope. This darkness may additionally represent the intensity present in the individual.

In "Purdah II", Dharker depicts Muslim women in an alien social, cultural and political atmosphere. The poem forcefully expresses the serious humanistic and feministic concerns. The poem is an undaunted criticism of the way the society works against the freedom, dignity, will and choice of women, even in an alien land. The sound of "Allah -u-Akbar" comes as a reassurance and as a comfort even in a distant land. A group of twenty women hear "the mechanical recitation from the hustling pages of holy Koran without understanding a word, its meaning or sense". This is the shallowness of the traditional education. The words are nudged into the head as a pure rhythm on tongue, unsoiled by sense. The mood of the speaker is calm and poised throughout, even though she talks about the degrading and dehumanizing effect of prevalent social, cultural and religious sanction. The poem further talks about the traditional marriages. All the girls are fated to live and die with no will or choice of their own. They are "unwilling virgins" who had been taught to bind their brightness tightly round, whatever they might wear, in Purdah of mind. This veil is not only a concealing garment but also a veil of mind which is much more dangerous and harmful. But, with the acceptance of these norms, there is also a will to fight back. In the lines, "they veiled their eyes, with heavy lids, they hid their breasts, but not the fullness of their lips"

Women were living within the lines drawn for them by the society.



**Fig.2. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: imtiazdharker.com)**



**Fig.3. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: imtiazdharker.com)**

This is clearly visible in the sketch represented by figure 2 accompanying the poem "Purdah II", where the faces are outlined in straight lines. These faces have darkness all around them to symbolize the darkness that is present in the world for them. Here too, the faces are not in Purdah.

The second sketch in figure 3 with the poem “Purdah II” shows two women who are hiding their faces. They may be the same women who were shown earlier. As they opened their eyes, stepped out of the lines drawn for them, they became fallen and defiled. It is therefore perhaps that they are hiding their faces. The sketch also shows movement in the darkness that is covering the faces of women. It forces us to think if this image is the reality and thus complete, or is it just a fleeting image in our minds? Moreover, the hands on faces can be read in two opposite ways. One to hide the face or identity because of shame and other could be an effort to remove the veil put on her identity to claim her autonomous existence. Here again, the reader is thrown into ambiguity as it can symbolize an existential crisis or can also be an assertion of existence.

Matthew Freeman is of the opinion that:

Transmediality examines the dynamics of participatory worlds in the age of digital convergence. It offers some new perspectives on participatory and interactive worlds by considering the complex underlying rationales that can underpin why audiences choose to participate in imaginary worlds across media. Understanding how participatory worlds existed under a different logic besides the digital participatory model of contemporary media convergences also means acknowledging factors of promotion, with participation offered as a kind of marketing strategy. (Freeman 112)

Dharker also draws the mouth of her images as symbolizing volcanoes that are calm from outside but have fire and anger pent up inside. But at the same it forces us to think that what if these volcanoes burst? Will it be as destructive as the hot lava of volcanoes or will it be helpful in bringing a change in the world? Dharker thus leaves her reader wondering.

Where Dharker’s Purdah collection is majorly about women, her later collection Postcards From God’ published in 1994, is a more overt social critique. It was in this collection that Dharker’s poetry negotiated with issues like fundamentalism, terrorism and violence in ways that are quite unconventional. This collection focused primarily on the Babri demolition and its aftermath. In a section entitled “Bombay: the Name of God”, Dharker highlights how people use the name of god or religion to fulfill their own vested interests. In the poem “Name of God”, the poet contrasts the common people’s plea to god with the jargons used by extremists by comparing „the still flame of an oil lamp “to the, fire spread across the floor.”

Dharker’s god is no more than a tourist in this world, a mere visitor walking “...around battered streets / distinctly lost / looking for landmarks /from another promised parts.” (Postcards from God 1, 9-10). The fundamentalists are not true worshippers of God. They hack out the name of God itself through the violence that they spread. As can be noticed in the lines, “everywhere you scream my words/But you forget my name”, God asks his devotees “did I create you in my image, or did you create me in yours”. Moreover, the sketch helps us to understand the multiple meanings hidden behind the lines.



**Fig.4. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: [imtiaz dharker.com](http://imtiazdharker.com))**

The sketch in figure 4 represents Purdah poems, a disordered place is shown, perhaps a back lane of a house or a small and private place for women to bathe, where they have a small bird in a cage for their



entertainment. The cage in the image is shown to be empty, with its door open. This can be interpreted in multiple ways. It can be read as a sign of rebellion by the oppressed. When we trap a bird, its ability to fly freely is curbed. Moreover, the empty cage with open door may mean that the trap is set for another victim to be lured in. Further, if we concentrate on the cage, we realize that Dharker has not really drawn out a cage; she has carved it out by leaving the black lines incomplete. Thus, implying that the darkness that prevails in society is creating a cage for the innocents. The wires of the cage are symbolic of the social taboos or other anti social elements which stand in darkness to trap others.

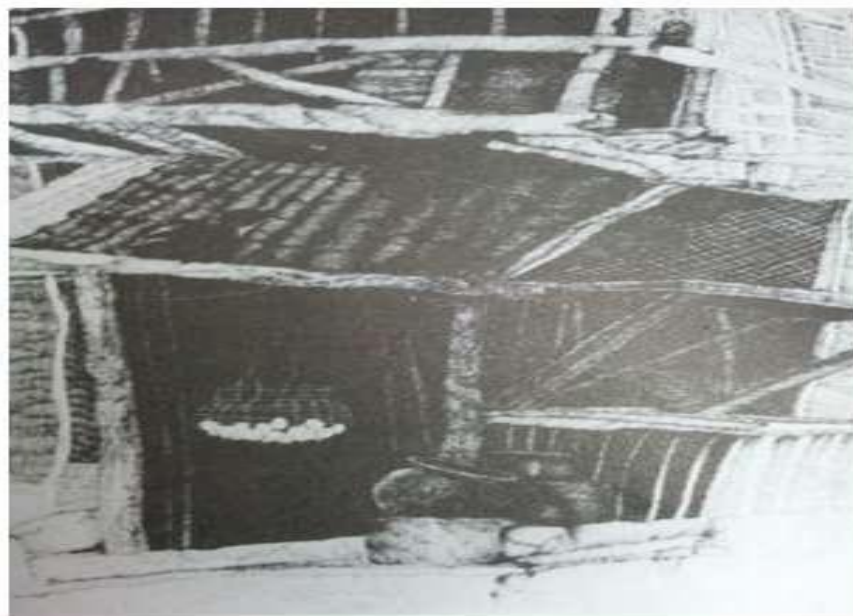
A bird is put into a cage not only to trap it but also to protect it from other outer harms. Similarly, a woman's confinement in the house or Purdah is justified by society as an endeavor to protect her from any harm. Therefore, all the images of home, cage and Purdah converge into one thought and yet bring out divergent meanings.

In her poem "Living space", Dharker again provides the reader and the viewer with the ambiguity that is a common feature of all her works. In the starting of the poem itself, Dharker says,

There are just not enough  
straight lines. That  
is the problem.  
Nothing is flat  
or parallel. Beams  
balance crookedly on supports  
thrust off the vertical.

Nails clutch at open seams. (1-8)

The whole structure in figure 5 which represents the poem leans dangerously towards the miraculous. The image that etches out of these lines is haphazard. Everything seems to be falling out of place. There is complete absence of linearity as nothing is flat and beams balance crookedly. The whole structure is leaning dangerously perhaps towards something miraculous.



**Fig.5. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: [imtiaz dharker.com](http://imtiazdharker.com))**

These lines also hold true for the sketches and verses of Dharker, though the images drawn in both her art forms are confusing and ambiguous, yet when we try to decipher them, the image that comes out is

miraculous. What is worth noticing is that someone has squeezed a living space in this rough frame and has dared to place eggs amid this chaos. This living space in the chaotic environment may refer to the lives of people in Dharavi. In that slum, the living conditions of people are very harsh and problematic. They live amidst dirt and filth. Also these dangerously leaning structures may refer to the after effects of the communal riots that took place in Mumbai.

^This poem accompanies a carefully etched drawing where a wire basket is shown with eggs in it. These eggs may be symbolic of the importance that the future generation holds. The future is thought of as a provider of a ray of hope in the present chaos. And it is therefore that the poet writes:

fragile curves of white  
hung out over the dark edge  
of a slanted universe,  
gathering the light  
into themselves,  
as if they were  
the bright, thin walls of faith.(17-23)

Eggs have gathered the light into them. And have become walls of faith. Moreover, this image of eggs in a wire basket can also be read in a completely different way. These eggs may also tell that in the present devastation and chaos this is the only thing left. Also the eggs are open to be destroyed by the enemy. So is it that the last hope left is also about to get lost as the curves are fragile and walls of faith are thin? Eunice de Souza writes about this poem: “The strongest poem in the book Postcards from God, however, is “Living Space”, which catches exactly the ramshackle quality of life in this country, and the spirit of survival that so often and so mysteriously accompanies it” (49).

The next poem in the study is “Seats of Power”. The poem starts with the lines, “there is great shuffling, in the corridors of power”. This “shuffling” may refer to the ever changing and ambivalent thoughts and masks that people put up to rise to power and gain stature. Shuffling means that there is no stability, no certainty, and no belongingness. This is highly symbolic of the ambivalence that exists in today’s society. There is a flurry of whispering. This shows that people are not talking clearly. They are hiding things and therefore their motives. Faces are prepared to dupe others and the innocents. The image drawn is typical of the conniving and ruthless politicians who use their seats of power in inappropriate ways:

There is a great shuffling  
in the corridors of power,  
a flurry of whispering,  
a small shower of niceties. (1-4)

The earlier mentioned “shuffling” suddenly turns to “immobility of an old man.” This sudden change is highly ambiguous. The images of “blade finding a flesh” and “permission given for carnage to begin”, clearly implies the death of innocents that took place in the riots that followed Babri demolition. It does not hint at those riots particularly but stands valid for all riots or massacres that took place in the past or take place now. Here, religion, caste or creed does not matter, what is important is that humanity is suffering a great loss. Moreover, the carnage literally means slaughter of great number of people. Here, it may not literally be the slaughter of people but a symbolic one, slaughter of feelings, emotions, innocence, dreams and duty to get seats of power.

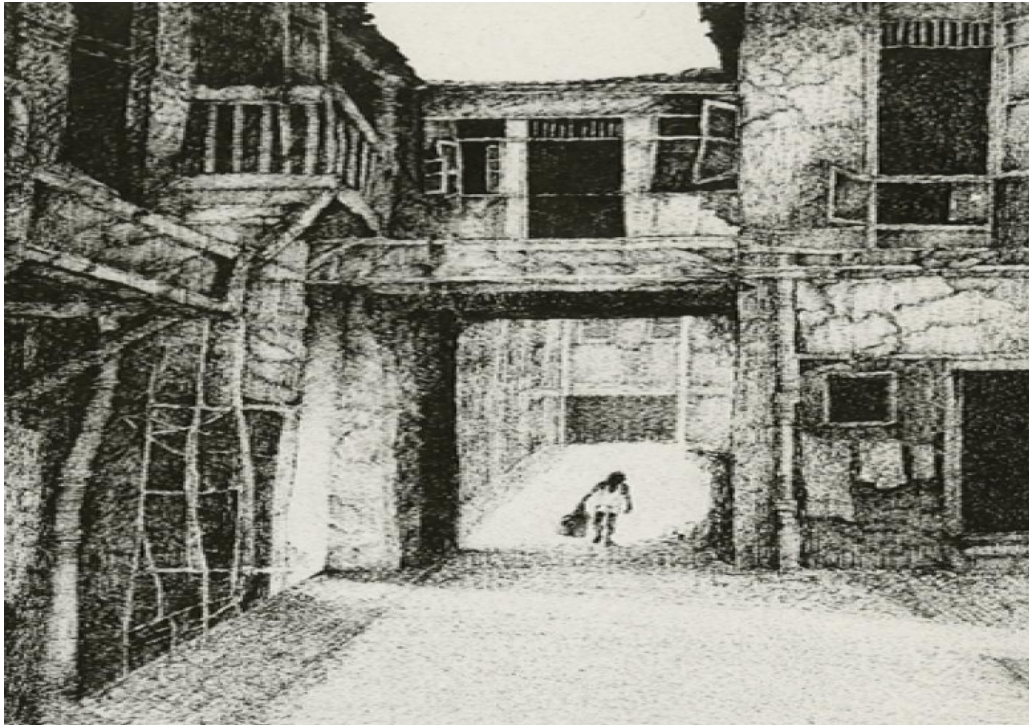


**Fig.6. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: imtiaz dharker.com)**

The sketch in figure 6 which represents the poem “Seats of Power”, one observes a number of crows sitting on wires. Though birds are symbolic of mobility and shuffling, they are shown here as seated, against their normal nature. Moreover, a crow is a scavenger, a bird that feeds on filth and dead remains of others. It destroys the eggs of other birds. It shows that it destroys the future itself. Also, crows are very particular about their territory. Here, crows may symbolize the people on seats of power in society. Also, we can notice that there is a broad black strand right in the middle of the sketch. It implies the division of the human society or perhaps any other unity. The image in the background is a complete whole. We can clearly establish the continuity of things behind the black strand. It shows that the human eye visualizes things as a whole. We try to imbue everything with humanity. We want to see it as a holistic entity. This division is also the archetypal division at the psychological level. Moreover, this may be a line of division between secularism and religious fanaticism. Learning about politics is often an investigation into how people gain and use political power. This poem is a starting point for the debate about democracy and nationality. The transmedial inheritance of Imtiaz Dharker’s work brings out the complex nature of politics and society.

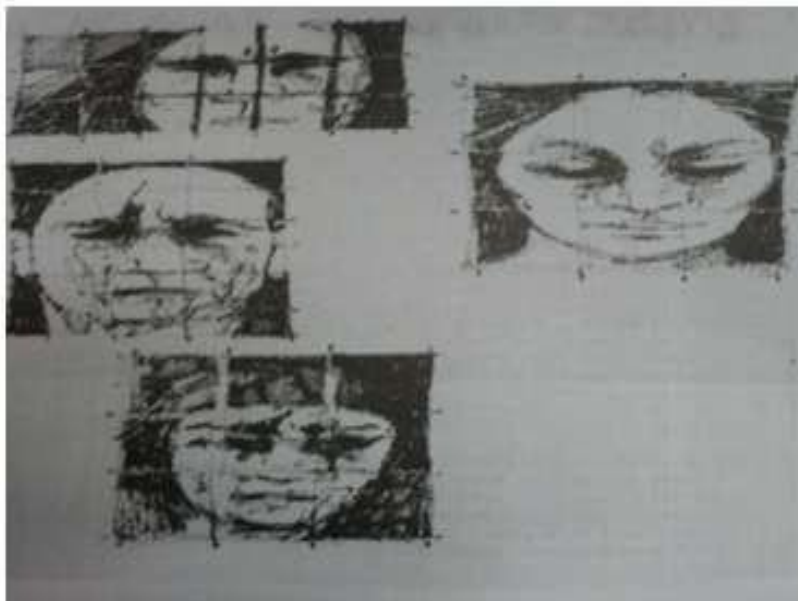
Dharker portrays the aftermath of these anti social activities in her poem “Namesake”. In this poem, she compares the blessed angel, Adam to his ten year old namesake in Dharavi. Dharavi is the biggest slum in Mumbai. Adam’s namesake has never faced the angels; instead he has survived with the pigs that are an epitome of filth and dirt. The poem progresses to tell us the condition of that a ten year old boy and thus tell us about the fate of all the victims and survivors of the riots. Riots lead to utter devastation. It lands people in depths of poverty which force a child to lose his childhood. Women are left with no option but to sell their bodies. This darkness is clearly incorporated in the sketch where a boy is shown carrying a burden.





**Fig.7. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: imtiaz dharker.com)**

The rooms and windows which generally are symbolic of hope and light are filled with darkness here. The boy doesn't have a shadow, perhaps to show that there is no light source or hope available. There is nothing with which the little boy can claim affiliation. There is a total absence of any kind of support. The child is carrying a burden, may be the result of ruthless activities of others, thus, he is lost into darkness. What is perplexing in the image is that we do not know whether the child is getting into darkness or is he stepping out of it. Is he also a victim of the gruesome activities or is he a rebel, who has decided to raise a voice against the atrocities. The next poem in this study is "Minority". This poem may be read as a plea of those who belong to minority of any or all kinds.



**Fig.8. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: imtiaz dharker.com)**

Those people feel like foreigners in all places, belonging only to the margins, yearning to come toward the centre. People, who have admirable history, distance themselves from those in minority. All the images used for the depiction of minority are chaotic that lead to utter confusion and lack of meaning throughout. Images used for them are of “clumsily translated poem”, “food cooked in coconut milk instead of ghee or cream”, “unexpected aftertaste of neem.” Moreover, the “language also starts to lose its meaning as it flips into an unfamiliar taste, words tumble”.



**Fig.9. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: imtiaz dharker.com)**

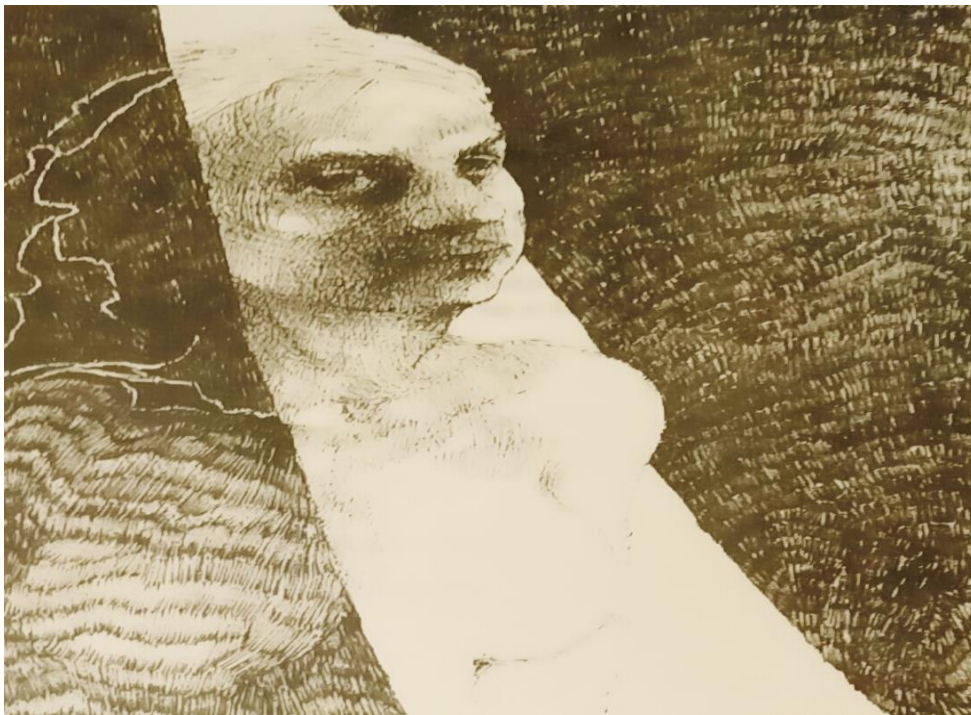
The sketches with the poem show six faces in the dark. All the faces are very guilt ridden. The cause of this guilt is unknown and therefore ambiguous. Moreover, here too, the faces are devoid of eyes and perhaps identity too. As scientifically proven, eyes are the first organ of human body to establish identity. Eyes are a window to the soul and Dharker highlights the darkness felt by the souls by hiding the eyes. The faces have lines over them as if they are encaged faces pinned on the wall, castigated and excluded. The lines over the face may also mean that these faces are on the other side of the window, peeping in to belong to something, since they don't possess anything and are bereft of all associations. Imtiaz Dharker, in her poems and sketches, celebrates the power of art amid the debris of social and cultural institutions. It seems that Dharker speaks for all women and finds vicarious release within her poetic praxis for the violent feelings suppressed by women due to the repressive codes imposed upon them.

For those who consider women's poetry as personal, domestic, interiorized, narrowly concerned with women's experiences and hence not serious or universal, Imtiaz Dharker, through her poetry breaks these bondages and takes women poetry to a higher level.

Dharker's poetic vision is crisscrossed not only by her motivations and commitments, but also by the paradoxes and ambivalences it constructs within the aesthetic. In her poetry, she refuses to name any religion or community as aggressor – aggrieved, thus implicating all and none, only preferring to stress the common humanity of victims. Human suffering is conveyed at the primal level. She frames communalism as a metaphor for the human capacity for violence and bestiality rather than clash of

religions. Her use of lines creates ambiguity, but at the same time it thrusts the reader into shifting dynamics of life. Her use of straight lines, help the readers to establish the curvatures that exist in society and remain veiled. The readers are shaken out of their complacency by reading the world and people between the lines. Multiple contextual interpretations are evoked. The traced paths and patterns become ambiguous.

The poem “Honour Killing” is accompanied by the drawing of a female figure in the process of stepping out of black curtains – presumably coat and veil – and, nakedly, entering a different, lighter space. The parts of her body that have already stepped out appear undefined and blurred, which provides a striking contrast between this drawing and the first drawing of the collection that depicts a veiled woman as figure 10. The drawing of the veiled woman is marked by strong lines and clearly demarcated boundaries between the body, its surroundings and the veil that encases it whereas in the drawing accompanying “Honour Killing” the woman’s contours are so fragile that at times there is no dividing line visible between the figure and its surroundings. She is presented as having more space outside of the coat / veil, but at the same time it also pictures the uncertainty as to who she is without the roles and norms that had previously determined her existence.



**Fig.10. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: [imtiaz dharker.com](http://imtiazdharker.com))**

When the poem and drawing are taken together, an ambivalent picture emerges of the woman’s rejection of affiliations. While the poem highlights the opportunity to energetically remake a new self by “making, crafting, plotting / at [her] new geography,” the drawing calls attention to the precariousness such an undertaking entails; the figure’s somber facial expression does not appear to mirror the speaker’s energetic tone. Often in Dharker’s art, “the gray-scale subtlety is evident in both media, where the common strength is the ‘line’ itself”. This subtlety becomes obvious when both media and their dialogue are examined with a transmedial approach. Reading the different media involved as part of a transmedial whole only further emphasizes the highly complex and differentiated nature of Dharker’s art.



What has been killed in this honour killing is not the speaker, who in the following embarks on a journey to reformulate herself, but a notion of honour that from the speaker's perspective burdens women with a life that forces them to betray and neglect themselves. This position is further underlined by the fact that the process of taking away parts of the speaker's identity is mirrored in the length of the stanzas. They become shorter the more things she casts off, which is reversed as soon as she claims to take off her womb. Even before she has begun to actively refashion herself, formal elements imply that this striptease does not end in a reduced self of the speaker. Rather it gives her the opportunity to grow again, this time unobstructed by the influence of others and wholly according to her own beliefs.



**Fig.11. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: imtiaz dharker.com)**

The poem, "Tissue", by Imtiaz Dharker not only describes the power of a paper, and its various usages, but it also talks about the fragility and power of humanity. The poet also states how a paper can "alter things" and relates its soft skin to the religious aspect, with the reference of the Qur'an. Apart from a tissue's religious, personal, and humane references, the poet also relates it to its other long-lasting usages, such as maps, receipts, and architect drawings. In all, the poem suggests how fragile and important a paper is, but unfortunately, we take it for granted and throw it into the dustbin after its use by just considering it a piece of paper.

This poem concentrates on the different things in life that keep us bridled or in control and represents that our lives are mapped out by the paper. It examines different themes; nature, religion, wealth, pride, life and freedom. Some of the lines in the pencil sketch in figure 11 are complex and they raise many questions, such as; is it about spiritual fulfillment? Does the persona desire a world without many constraints? Is it ultimately about life being fragile/transient (temporary)?

Distinguishing out this line lays emphasis on the correlation of paper and skin, depicting the significance of human life. The direct pronoun "your" is addressed to the readers. As one values human life and compares its susceptibility to a paper which is an extended metaphor all through the poem.

Each of these items is associated with significant aspects of life: journeys, money, and home. These examples reveal how important but also how fragile paper is. In the final stages of the poems, the poet associates the idea of a building being made from paper to human skin, using the words 'living tissue' and then 'your skin.' This is quite a complex idea, and the meaning is open to elucidation. She may be

suggestive of the significance of human life which will outlast the records we make of it on paper or in a building. There is also a sense of vulnerability of human life, and the fact that not everything can last long. Reading a different media occupied as part of a transmedial whole only further emphasizes the highly intricate and differentiated nature of Dharker's art.

Imtiaz Dharker's collection *I Speak for the Devil*, like all her books of poetry, comes in the form of an arrangement of poems and drawings; it is divided into three seemingly separate sequences, "They'll Say, 'She Must Be from Another Country,'" "The Broken Umbrella" and "I Speak for the Devil." Thematically, it is concerned with gender issues, the spaces women are allowed to inhabit in different societies and their struggle to break free from restrictive gender roles. Poet and critic Arundhati Subramaniam describes *I Speak for the Devil* as "[a]n iconoclastic in-your-face exultation – an unabashed celebration of a self that strips off layers of superfluous identity with grace and abandon, only to discover that it has not diminished, but has grown larger, more generous, more inclusive" and speaks of "Dharker's unabashed embrace of unsettlement as settlement."

About half the poems in the collection are in a similar tone. As titles such as "Here," "There," "Announcing the Departure..." and "Announcing the Arrival" indicate this section is loosely structured in the form of a journey. In a conflation of metaphorical and descriptive level, this trip is presented both as a journey towards self-discovery and self refashioning and at the same time also as a migratory journey to another country. The poems in the first half of the series hence, pass through diverse stages of travelling; some with regard to changes in location, others regarding states of mind. They are marked by shifting perspectives and changing positioning and often show the sense of puzzlement and bewilderment that often comes with the new territory.

Thus, "The Orders" represented by figure 12 is marked by the sensation of seeing oneself through the eyes of another. Reflections figure prominently in addition to the speaker's "disordered face", which can only be reflected correctly by a broken mirror. Nothing at all seems certain for the speaker, who appears to be looking at herself as if from a distance. She says, "Why is this mirror broken? / It makes sense of my disordered face".



**Fig.12. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: [imtiaz dharker.com](http://imtiazdharker.com))**

Her emotional state is foregrounded in the consecutive poems, "Here," and "There," which are a reflection of the geographic distance she puts between herself and the nation she came from. Both poems



are centered on the same geographic location, but the “here” she came from has turned into “there” if looked at from her new location. In addition, “There” is marked by a sense of regret. The speaker details that in the past, “there” was a chaotic, haphazard place in which somebody else had the power to make decisions while she had neither choice nor voice. Yet, upon her return, she realizes that much has changed that could have led to compromise between the addressee and herself, but she has come back too late for any reconciliation: “Now it doesn’t matter when I speak. / It will always be too late”. The speaker realizes that she cannot go back to her past but appears not to have fully arrived in her new place.

“Stitched” likewise stresses her lack of belonging and lack of being accepted in an unspecified place that could just as well describe her country of origin after her return as the country she emigrated to. She is alienated and unable to fit in wherever she is:

Someone stitched on my head and hands  
but they used some foreign stuff  
that pointed out the parts  
where I’d been mended.  
And so my mouth spoke Punjabi  
while my brain heard Scots.  
My ears followed German  
and my tongue did French.  
It seems they were about to put me out  
in a garbage bag, I looked so odd.  
But I survived,  
and they got used to the way I was.  
Sometimes they act as if  
I’m one of them. (1-14)



**Fig.13. Illustrated by Imtiaz Dharker (Source: [imtiaz dharker.com](http://imtiazdharker.com))**

While “they” is not particularized any further, the drawing in figure 13 accompanying this poem offers an exciting addition. Similarly to the drawing described above, it shows another naked female figure, located in an empty space between drapes of black cloth. Yet this figure is not in the process of leaving the cloth but rather appears to be located behind the cloth as if the viewer is covered by it and looks out at the figure from behind it. It suggests that what makes the speaker look “odd” is the perception and decree of someone who is not marked by many influences from different nations and cultures and who has never left the borders of nation, religion and gender. The speaker herself, however, is not in control of what happens to her and how her hybridity is evaluated. She is dependent on the acceptance of others, which only happens “sometimes”. Understandably, she begins to question whether she has made the right decision and reflects on whether she should not better start the process of refashioning herself all over again: “Maybe it’s time, again, to come undone”. The dark and light straight lines sketched on the right hand side of the woman’s picture and on the “head” and “hands” show the stitches “they” tailored to monitor and systemize the thoughts and actions of women in society. The horizontal slant lighting strokes which entangle the women in the sketch stand for external forces which try to put her in a “garbage bag” by misrepresenting her multiple identity of “Punjabi”, “Scots”, “German” and “French”. The unfinished right hand and the left leg in the drawing embody the speaker’s scattered and blurred identity. While her uneasiness is treated lightly in “Tongue,” and “12 noon” which depicts a profound sense of alienation and disillusionment. The speaker is possessed by an urgent desire to belong somewhere, which is mixed with nostalgia for the home she has left. The place she now resides in feels wrong to her.

## II CONCLUSION

The concluding poems of the sequence echo the speaker’s newfound optimistic and idealistic attitude. Nostalgia and homesickness no longer hold her back; she has found a sense of home in a space she has created for herself in which questions of gender, religion or nationality no longer seem to matter (“At the Lahore Karhai”). The culture she left can be remembered in a shared meal with friends if she feels in the mood for it but if she does not, there are other possibilities (“At the Lahore Karhai”). Affiliations with and attachments to collective identities have become interchangeable and casual: “This winter, we have learnt / to wear our past / like summer clothes” (“At the Lahore Karhai” 37-39). The speaker is now securely positioned in-between and has rejected the possibility of ever belonging to just one nation or culture again. Even after her death, she does not want to be associated with religion or nationality but asks for her ashes to be left in “some country / I have never visited” (“Not a Muslim Burial” 10-11), “or better still, / leave them on a train, / travelling / between” (12-15).

The researcher finds a technical improvement in the sketches, where the strokes are well controlled, varying from type to type in gentleness and stability, darkness and lightness. One can see an extensive tonal modeling of three-dimensional forms and elaborate effects. The preciseness and clarity are associated with the gravity of emotions. The drawings emulate the brilliant atmosphere of the women’s world. Her sketches are precise and detailed, which move beyond photographic naturalism by imbuing them with a sense of subjective emotions and objective evaluation. Reading the diverse media involved as part of a transmedial whole only further emphasizes the highly complex and differentiated nature of Dharker’s art.

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