
**Voicing Resistance: Awareness and Assertion in Contemporary
Women's Poetry**

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Abstract

The paper examines the articulation of resistance, awareness, and self-assertion in contemporary women's poetry, situating it within broader socio-political and cultural frameworks. It argues that for modern women poets' poetry is not merely a literary form but a transformative space for reclaiming agency, challenging patriarchal structures, and reconfiguring identity. Through a close reading of selected works of Imtiaz Dharkar and Tara Patel, the study explores how themes of body, sexuality, silence, violence, and autonomy are reimagined as sites of resistance.

The paper further contends that contemporary women's poetry moves beyond victimhood to assert a conscious, self-reflexive voice that negotiates oppression with resilience and creativity. By foregrounding lived experiences and intersectional identities, these poets resist hegemonic narratives and construct alternative discourses of empowerment. The analysis also highlights the role of language, imagery, and form in expressing dissent and fostering awareness among readers.

Key Words: Resistance, Self-assertion, Gender identity, Voice and agency.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.

Audre Lorde

Women have borne the brunt of subjugation across the world since ages. All the major religions and cultures of the world have granted secondary status to woman. She has been harassed and marginalized irrespective of caste, creed and culture. But then the question arises how long one can sustain injuries. How long one can be dissuaded from taking up arms? It is a well-known fact that every action has a reaction, so protest too is the obvious reaction of extreme form of exploitation and cruelty. Exploitation and protest go hand in hand. It is inherent in injustice to breed protest. It is inherent in human nature to revolt, to dissent and to rebel against unjust laws and treatment. Rufus Browning opines: "Protest is the expression of human spirit and human spirit is the agent of eventual subversion. Protest springs out of human spirit and a protestor upholds human rights and civil liberties. His is the way of confronting the system and he always feels at variance with the authoritarian trends" (241).

Moreover, protest is not inert, it fosters change. It keeps a human society alive and humane and saves it from stagnation. In protest a promise of a new world is born because a protestor fights against the 'given' values and tries to deduce new values from the existing conditions of living. Moreover, the mechanism of protest involves not only an awareness of injustice but also a strong and sincere note of assertion.

In the late 19th and 20th century literary world the female voices of dissent started surfacing. A close study of the stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics and the limited roles women play in literary history reveals not what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be. Major western literary theorists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Wolf, Simon de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Helen Cixous and others propounded the theoretical models of feminism which successfully deconstruct age old binaries and gender-politics which were dominant in philosophical and political thinking. Elaine Showalter remarks:

The task of feminist critics is to find a new language, a new way of reading that can integrate our intelligence and our experience, our

reason and our suffering, our skepticism and our vision. The enterprise should not be confined to women; I invite critics, Porticus and Plutarch to share it with us. One thing is certain: feminist criticism is not visiting. It is here to stay, and we must make it a permanent home. (Showalter 407)

They did a commendable job in theorizing the issues and problems of women in a patriarchal society where their inner feelings were suppressed. They stood against the misogynist discourse and an urgent need was felt to articulate the angst and silences of women. These theorists inspired several women writers to free themselves from the constraints and pressures of the male literary canons and 'rewrite' themselves. In India also feminist critics of 19th century like Tarabai Shinde, Cornelia Sorabji, Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain contributed towards gender equality and other social issues related to women. In the postmodern era they aim at a de-recognition of the linear absolutes of male history. The contemporary postmodern women writers seek to deconstruct stereotyped images of women and reconstruct suppressed female narratives by making an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it (Hutcheon 167). They find that the institute of literature has been under the male authority and all literary and cultural practices have been vitiated by the two concepts - patriarchal mindset and concept of gender.

Though in the western world the women poets started raising their voice against injustice under the influence of feminist thinkers, in India women writers have been smashing patriarchy for generations. The earliest voices of rejection of conventional gender roles and attributes can be heard in the ancient women poets like Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded and Meerabai. Later prominent Indian writers like Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai carried this legacy forward, particularly after independence, during 1960s and after, Indian women poetry took an altogether different turn from its predecessors Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. With the emergence of Kamla Das on the literary horizon poetry became defiant and bold. Other prominent female voices of this era were Gauri Deshpande, Eunice de Souza, Suniti Namjoshi, Tara Patel, Imtiaz Dharker Melanie Silgado et al., these women poets like their male counterparts showed a total rejection of the past and raised their

voice against the patriarchal hegemonic conventions that proved to be detrimental in the growth of their feminine sensibilities.

The poetry of Imtiaz Dharker, Tara Patel revolve around this suffocating world where a woman with a postmodern perspective, attempts to deconstruct the patriarchal binaries with strong assertion that a woman is not all the time meant to fulfill the social obligations. They rebel against the conventional role of women in the society and struggle to assert their new identity as independent, individualistic and conscious participants in the general drama of life. Their voice of protest and assertion can be rightly described in the words of Chavan, “the ‘Fair Voice’ in Indian Poetry in English is not a ‘sparrow’s voice,’ it is a ‘true voice of feeling’” (1). Blessed with the sense of awareness Dharker, Tara Patel and Melanie Silgado present their sensitivity towards social issues in bold manner. The tone of protest and assertion of individuality is very distinct in their works.

The postmodern approach of flouting traditional values and displaying different facets of feminine experiences is manifested in the works of the poets selected for the study. These poets writing from diverse cultural, linguistic and geographical spaces bring forward the question of women's emancipation, their self-discovery and so-called self- representation. The core of this paper is to explore feminine journey of liberation beginning with a sense of awareness of marginalized status of women and their rebellious assertion with a postmodernist perspective in the poems of Tara Patel, Imtiaz Dharker.

Tara Patel in her book *Single Woman* projects the image of a new woman who is living by herself as an individual flouting traditional, social and moral values and keeps her life away from stagnant survival. Patel in her poem “Woman” writes:

“A woman's life is a reaction
to the crack of a whip...” (9)

But this pain ultimately moves her to adopt a rebellious stance. Patel continues:

“Then in rebellion she turned her face
to the whip,
till pain became a river in flood
wreaking vengeance” (9).

The protagonist in the poem knows that the whip of patriarchal dictates cannot be escaped, the only solution lies in facing them, turning the induced pain into a weapon. She considers all her options:

“She ran away to live as an escaped convict,
or a refugee,
or a yogi in the wilderness of civilization” (9).

The protagonist in the poem realizes finally that the whip of patriarchal dictates cannot be escaped, the only solution lies in facing them, turning the induced pain into a weapon. So she decides to challenge all repressive codes and gets assertive. In her poems she challenges such above mentioned social constructs of womanhood:

“My mother always told me, 'Hide your face- the people are looking at you',
I would reply, 'It doesn't matter,
I am also looking at them',
and she would get cross” (12).

In "Trees of Passion" Patel brings symbolic use of Gul Mohurs when they assault the poet:

"They leave you alone
You can leave them alone" (12).

There is a direct confrontation of the "Male Gaze" i.e. if women can be looked at in a certain way, they too can look back.

Imtiaz Dharker too being a staunch feminist, voices her resistance against an organized culture. Her poetry, a combination of her artistic talent and her personal experience, presents a realistic picture of an orthodox Islamic tradition and her rebellion against such repressive culture observed by an

intelligent and sensitive Muslim Woman poet. In the poem “Minority”, Dharker points out the need to be assertive how much painful it might turn out to be:

"Everyone has the right to infiltrate a piece of paper.
A page doesn't fight back" (Postcard, 57).

In her anthologies, *Purdah*, *The Terrorist at My Table* and *I Speak for The Devil*, Dharker brings to life her lived experience. Her poetry is rich in texture and obliquity- of doors ‘opening inward and again inward’(15), of the subtle interplay of advance and retreat across ‘the borderline of skin.’

Her "Purdah-II" presents the postmodern sense of rejecting the patriarchal stranglehold. This work obliquely criticizes several aspects of Muslim society. Dharker shows her defiance against the exploitation of women under the garbs of religious activities. She exposes Hazi in Purdah II:

“There was nothing holy in his book
Hands that had prayed at Macca
Dropped a sly flower on your book” (Purdah 6).

Dharker voices her resistance against the hypocritical religious activities revealing the hollowness of religion. But despite all this, she does not sympathize with women but "on the contrary she celebrates the feminine mystique with an interesting argument"(Naik 50-51). Dharker’s book *I speak for the Devil* (2003) is dedicated to all, "Who stood up and spoke out...who are still struggling to find their feelings and their voices . . . and who haven't yet begun" (ISFD, Introduction). The book has three sections and the first section begins with the collective voice of women against rules made by religious leaders and ends proclaiming being different from other women who suffer passively. The title has the first person 'I' in the beginning. Through the 'Devil' within her she enjoys freedom. Taking the opportunity of Devil's voice, Dharker uses it as a weapon to expose hypocrisy of both religious leaders and their activities which is the reason for women's exploitation. She enjoys her freedom when possessed by the Devil's voice to speak freely because as a woman she is denied this freedom of speech. Dharker writes: “The title

sequence I Speak for the Devil is apt in acknowledging that in many societies women are respected, or listened to only when they are carrying someone else inside their bodies - a child or a devil. For some, to be "possessed" is to be set free" (ISFD Introduction 46).

The reading of the book makes a powerful impact and it sensitizes the reader, awakens and rouses his conscience to the urgent feminist concerns. She starts the book by narrating a cruel practice in Islam "Honor killing": "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 'Honor Killing'" (11).

This incident moves Dharker deeply and she makes an open revolt with her culture in the poem "Honour Killing". She makes an open revolt saying:

At last I'm taking off this coat,
this black coat of a country
that I swore for years was mine,
..... this black veil of a faith
that made me faithless
to myself,
that tied my mouth,
gave my god devil's face.
and muffled my own voice. (13)

Dharker believes religion to be a correct interpretation of faith so she rejects the faith that does not allow her to enjoy her freedom. With a postmodern approach of rejection of values Dharker starts her new journey towards her emancipation by stripping herself of her clothes, her old self, which bears humiliations given by society. She casts off all claims of religion, culture and country. Earlier she was carrying the baggage of these worn-out customs thinking 'I had no choice' (13). She removes every part of her body that reminded her of oppressive culture: "I'm taking off this skin and then the face the flesh, / The womb" (13). The poem presents the process of stripping herself

naked, before emerging as an altogether different one. In a very candid manner she expresses her irreverence to religion and it's so called propagators:

The crooks and thugs
who wear the uniform
that gives them the right
to wave a flag ,
Puff out their chests,
Put their feet on our necks,
and break their own rules. (38)

The postmodern rejection of a rationalized closed system of codes is seen in her rejection of belongingness to any religion, culture and country. She writes further:

“And I will be happy to say,

I never learned your customs.
I don't remember your language
or know your ways.
I must be
from another country” (38).

Further the poem "Not a Muslim Burial" expresses her desire: "No one must claim me... /No name, no nationality /let them label the remains lost property" (*Devil* 37). Being a true postmodernist spirit, she finds them 'arbitrary artificial constructs' (38). She enjoys the feeling of not belonging to anywhere and thinks of building a separate place for herself and all women where they can grow freely. Her poetry echoes with the collective voice of women who proceed towards an acceptance and understanding of the position of women. Dharker mocks the hypocritical men in holy outfits carrying holy books who are the progenitors of the gender difference in the society. She definitely raises her arms against the prescriptive codes of religion that are gender biased. The holiness and humanity are lost. Man is devoid of any faith and devotion which is a postmodern trait. Dharker suggests the emptiness of religion:

God was hijacked long ago
held hostage in empty churches desecrated temples
Broken mosques. (98)

The images of 'empty churches,' 'desecrated temples,' and 'broken mosques' blatantly symbolize her faithlessness towards a hollow religion that too collude with man in carrying out woman's oppression.

Thus, women's writing in the postmodern era can be seen as a multipronged potent move that poses a postmodern challenge towards socio-culturally constructed womanhood whereby women are defined as per the norms that are convenient to patriarchal power structure. The patriarchal society is intact despite many revolutionary movements for the empowerment of women. From time immemorial men have affirmed their standing as sovereign subjects denying women even the dignity of being a person. Under societal pressures it becomes very difficult for a woman to revolt against the repressive mainstream codes.

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