ISSN: 2582-5526 www.thevoiceofcreativeresearch.com

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n3.16

From Constraint to Liberation: Interrogating Religion and Culture through Gender in Imtiaz Dharker's Poetic Vision

Ayesha Zameer
Research Scholar
Department of English
Ranchi University, Ranchi,
Jharkhand, India
Email: ayeshamgcg@gmail.com

Abstract

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry offers a searing critique of the intersecting forces of religion, culture, and gender that shape women's identities and lived realities. This paper undertakes a close textual analysis of three of her seminal poems—*Purdah, Honour Killing,* and *This Room*—to trace the trajectory from female constraint to self-liberation. Through the lens of feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional theory, the study explores how Dharker exposes patriarchal structures that confine women physically, psychologically, and spiritually, while simultaneously gesturing toward acts of defiance and self-assertion. Situating Dharker in conversation with poets such as Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das, the paper highlights her unique ability to weave personal experience with broader socio-political critique. Religion and culture emerge not as static entities, but as contested terrains where women negotiate agency, resist oppressive traditions, and reclaim bodily and intellectual autonomy. By juxtaposing Dharker's work with global literary discourses on gender and identity, this paper argues that her poetic vision not only interrogates structures of power but also reimagines spaces for liberation and transformation. This study adopts a qualitative, textual analysis framework to interrogate select poems from Imtiaz Dharker's oeuvre- *Purdah, Honour Killing,* and *This Room* and examines the intersectionality of religion and culture through gender, with Feminist theory and Postcolonial theory serving as the central critical lenses.

Keywords: Religion, culture, gender, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Intersection theory, liberation, power, transformation

ISSN: 2582-5526 www.thevoiceofcreativeresearch.com
The Voice of Creative Research
Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

Introduction

Imtiaz Dharker is a British poet, artist, and documentary filmmaker whose work engages deeply with questions of identity, displacement, faith, and womanhood. Born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1954 and raised in Glasgow, Scotland, Dharker's transnational upbringing and multicultural experiences have profoundly shaped her poetic voice. Her life straddles multiple geographies—South Asia, the Middle East, and the West—and this multiplicity informs the themes of hybridity, exile, and cultural negotiation that permeate her work. Dharker's poetry frequently navigates the intersections of religion, culture, and gender, particularly as they affect women's autonomy and self-perception. Drawing upon her early experiences within a conservative Muslim household and her later life in more secular and cosmopolitan contexts, she interrogates the social and religious codes that regulate female bodies and voices. As both an insider and an outsider to these cultural frameworks, Dharker offers a nuanced perspective that refuses reductive binaries between East and West, tradition and modernity, faith and freedom. Dharker's poetic style combines stark imagery with lyrical fluidity, often drawing upon visual metaphors inspired by her work as an artist. Her verse challenges oppressive religious interpretations while acknowledging the complex cultural and spiritual meanings faith can hold for individuals, especially women negotiating their place within intersecting systems of power. Dharker is widely recognized as a feminist poet, but her feminism is intersectional—she acknowledges that women's oppression cannot be separated from religion, culture, and class. This paper examines three of Dharker's poems- *Purdah, Honour Killing*, and *This Room*, to reveal how they interrogate and reclaim female subjectivity under patriarchal pressures embedded in religious and cultural structures. This layered approach positions her as a significant voice in contemporary feminist and postcolonial literature, one whose work continues to resonate in global conversations about faith, gender equality, and cultural belonging. This study asserts that Dharker's poetic vision stages symbolic acts of constraint and liberation, reflecting broader feminist and postcolonial concerns. By incorporating critical perspectives from Judith Butler (gender performativity), Gayatri Spivak (subaltern speech), Kimberlé Crenshaw (intersectionality), and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (contextual feminist critique), alongside comparative insights from global literary contemporaries, this essay situates Dharker within a cosmopolitan feminist poetics attuned to religious-cultural complexities.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature, employing textual analysis as the primary approach. The study involves a close reading of three of Imtiaz Dharker's poems— *Purdah, Honour Killing*, and *This Room* — to investigate how religion and culture intersect with gender constructs in her poetic vision. The analysis is supported by secondary scholarly sources from feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, and gender studies to contextualize Dharker's work within wider literary and socio-cultural frameworks. Comparative literary references from both male and female writers, such as Kamala Das, Adrienne Rich, and Mahmoud Darwish, help highlight Dharker's thematic and stylistic distinctiveness. The objective of this study is to critically analyse how Imtiaz Dharker's poetry challenges religious and cultural norms through

the lens of women's lived realities, focusing on mechanisms of control such as purdah, honour codes, and prescribed cultural roles. By adopting an intersectional perspective, the research seeks to examine the link between gender-based oppression and religious-cultural identity, while also demonstrating the capacity of poetry to act as a transformative medium for resisting and reimagining patriarchal narratives.

Discussion

In *Purdah*, Dharker examines the purdah (veil) not merely as a religious garment but as a metaphor for social, cultural, and psychological confinement. The poem begins, "One day they said/ she was old enough to learn some shame" (Dharker 1-2). Here, the initiation into purdah is framed as a lesson in shame, suggesting that the veil's significance extends beyond modesty to the internalization of patriarchal control. As Leela Gandhi notes, "female modesty in patriarchal societies functions as a coded means of regulating access to women's bodies" (Gandhi 88). Dharker depicts the veil as a second skin, a barrier that both conceals and isolates. She writes, "Voices speak inside us/echoing in the places we have just left" (Dharker, 23-24). This interior imprisonment illustrates what Simone de Beauvoir calls the "internalization of the gaze" (*The Second Sex* 45), where external restrictions become self-policing mechanisms. The poem blends sensory imagery with claustrophobic metaphors, showing how religious-cultural practices discipline the female subject into compliance. In the poem, the scarf is a religious symbol—absorbs shame. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, articulated in *Gender Trouble* (1990), asserts that gender is not a fixed identity but rather a series of acts and performances regulated by social norms (Butler 25). This framework is essential in understanding how Dharker's female subjects are compelled to enact femininity through dress codes, modest behavior, and spatial confinement. In *Purdah* and *Honour Killing*, for example, clothing is not merely functional but becomes a performative signifier of compliance with religious and cultural expectations. Butler's theory underscores that such performances are not natural but socially constructed— and therefore can be disrupted or re-scripted. It becomes a second skin—internalized authority. In this way, religion and culture become embodied forms of social control. Dharker continues by showing how modesty becomes self-policed. These prescriptions are cultural, patriarchal, and religious, fused into everyday discipline. The poem's rhythms—short lines, enjambed statements—mirror the speaker's constrained existence. As Mohanty argues, Dharker portrays a subject formed through cultural and religious structures yet capable of critical awareness (Mohanty 78). She treats religion not as monolithic oppression, but as sediment layered with psychological and embodied effects—and open to critique.

Her poem *Honour Killing* begins with the striking declaration:

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. (Dharker 1-5)

The "coat" here operates as a multi-layered metaphor for restrictive identities imposed by religion, culture, and gender expectations. By disrobing, the speaker rejects not only the literal and symbolic garments of control but also the ideological frameworks underpinning them. The act of removing the veil or coat echoes Hélène Cixous's call for women to "write themselves" free from the patriarchal text (*The Laugh of the Medusa* 876). The poem unfolds as a gradual stripping away—veil, skin, face, voice—culminating in the reclamation of a liberated self, untethered from "the face, the flesh, the womb" as defined by cultural honour codes. From a postcolonial perspective, this act challenges the gendered violence of "honour" crimes prevalent in certain South Asian contexts. As Spivak warns in "*Can the Subaltern Speak?",* women in such systems are doubly silenced—by patriarchy and by the cultural-nationalist discourses that claim to protect them. Spivak's provocative question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", highlights the structural silencing of marginalized voices, especially those of women in postcolonial contexts. In Dharker's *Purdah*, the woman behind the veil becomes emblematic of this enforced silence, rendered invisible in the public sphere. Spivak warns that even when women speak, their voices may be mediated, translated, or appropriated by dominant discourses. Dharker's poems work against this erasure, granting the silenced woman a first-person narrative agency that allows her to reclaim speech and self-definition which allows women to live their lives and do not follow the traditional rules assigned by men as they are exploitative and inferior. Mary A. Kassian also writes about such traditional roles assigned to women in the patriarchal structure of society in her book, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism With the Church*:

> Neither secular nor religious feminists liked the traditional role which had been assigned to women. They claimed this role had been determined by men and that it was oppressive to women. Feminist women rejected the right of men to regulate women's lives. (Kassian 67)

In *Honour Killing*, Dharker stages the act of undressing as a radical act of decolonization of the self. The sequential removal ("veil," "silks," "mangalsutra," "skin," "womb") suggests a stripping of imposed identities—nation, religion, ritual marriage, gendered roles. She further writes:

> I'm taking off this veil
> this black veil of a faith
> that made me faithless
> to myself. (Dharker 8-11)

These lines are very striking: religion, in its patriarchal deployment, made her lose trust in herself. The reversal—making oneself faithless—speaks to an epistemic dislocation. When she sheds the "mangalsutra," a Hindu marital symbol, and the "rings," Dharker criticizes how marriage becomes economic/dependent- "rattling in a tin cup of needs." The image of jewelry in a tin suggests survival, not love. In many cultures, the symbols associated with femininity and marriage are rooted in patriarchal traditions. While men are not expected to display any physical markers to indicate their marital status, women are often required to wear items such as the

mangalsutra, sindoor, heavy ornaments, and brightly colored attire to signify that they are married. She further writes,

I'm taking off these silks,
these lacy things
that feed dictator dreams,
the mangalsutra and the rings
rattling in a tin cup of needs
that beggared me. (Dharker 15-20)

From birth, a girl is constantly reminded that she is not a man and must conform to societal expectations of womanhood. Her clothing, manners, discipline, and behavior are strictly regulated, and she is trained in household duties while being encouraged to follow religious practices more intensely than her male counterparts. Dharker critiques this systemic marginalization and exploitation of women in many of her works. As she removes "skin" and "womb," the poem radicalizes feminist redefinition: the body is not the cage. The politics of honor often tether women's value to chastity and reproduction; Dharker liberates the self from those productionist imperatives. The final lines reconfigure identity as creative escape, not reproductive inventory.

Let's see
what I am in here
when I squeeze past
the easy cage of bone. (Dharker 24-27)

This powerful metaphorical undressing stands as poetic resistance. It recalls Cixous's concept of "écriture féminine" in which women write from the body to reclaim selfhood (Cixous 889). Dharker refuses objectification by dismantling the very symbols that objectified.

In *This Room*, Dharker shifts tone from critique to celebration of liberation. She writes:

This room is breaking out,
Of itself, cracking through
Its own walls
In search of space, light,
Empty air. (Dharker 1-5)

The room becomes a metaphor for the self, for identity breaking free from inherited confines. Objects "throw themselves" into freedom, mirroring the speaker's embrace of self-transformation. Unlike *Purdah* and *Honour Killing*, which focus on dismantling constraints, *This Room* imagines the aftermath—a world of possibility and agency. Judith Butler's concept of identity as performative resonates here; the room's transformation suggests that gender and cultural roles can be re-enacted in liberatory ways. The poem celebrates an active subjectivity, refusing the passive endurance often prescribed to women. In the poem, spices and open windows indicate diasporic sensuality: memory and longing. The poem refuses to treat domestic space as prison; instead, it becomes a site of rebirth. She writes in an optimistic approach,

Pots and pans bang together

In celebration, clang
Past the crowd of garlic, onions, spices,
Fly by the ceiling fan.
No one is looking for the door.
In all this excitement
I'm wondering where
I've left my feet, and why
My hands are outside, clapping. (Dharker 14-22)

Furthermore, this domestic re-mapping corresponds to the feminist claim that the personal is political (Rich 218). Dharker joins that tradition by showing domestic renewal as radical. The poem concludes with a communal affirmation—both political and relational. The private room calls to gathering, joy, and freedom.

Across the three poems, Dharker traces a trajectory: from internalized religious-cultural shame in *Purdah*, to active rejection of oppressive identities in *Honour Killing*, to creative and collective re-visioning of self and space in *This Room*. This progression aligns with Adrienne Rich's notion of the "politics of location," which suggests that understanding how a woman moves from imposed self-definition to self-possession is essential (Rich 212). Similarly, Dharker dialogues with Kamala Das's confessional poetry, which also disrupts normative expectations and highlights the female voice—even when the focus is sexual rather than spatial or religious.

Dharker's contribution is distinct in its diasporic syntax: she maps not just internal revolt but tangible metaphorical re-mapping of space, tradition, and belonging. She embodies Mohanty's call for feminist solidarity that transcends cultural essentialism—Dharker criticizes oppressive practices while affirming the complexity of identity across culture and religion (Mohanty 82). Bell Hooks, in works such as *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), emphasizes that gender cannot be examined in isolation from other axes of identity such as race, class, and culture. Dharker's diasporic sensibility makes her acutely aware of how these intersections operate, particularly for women caught between the demands of a conservative homeland culture and the freedoms or prejudices of a Western host society. Hooks's framework allows us to see how religion and culture intertwine with other systems of control, producing layered forms of oppression. In *Under Western Eyes* (1984), Mohanty critiques the tendency of Western feminist discourse to homogenize the experiences of "Third World women" without considering their specific historical and cultural contexts. Dharker's poetry resists such simplifications by portraying Muslim women's experiences with nuance — neither wholly oppressed victims nor symbols of exoticized difference. Mohanty's framework is crucial for reading Dharker without collapsing her work into reductive narratives of liberation that erase cultural specificity.

Islamic feminist scholars Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas have argued that the Qur'an, when read through an egalitarian lens, upholds gender equality, and that patriarchal oppression stems from male-dominated interpretations rather than divine intent. Wadud's *Qur'an and*

Woman (1992) and Barlas's *Believing Women in Islam* (2002) both advocate for reclaiming religious texts from androcentric readings

Conclusion

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry powerfully exposes the intricate and often oppressive nexus between religion, culture, and gender, refusing to allow these forces to remain invisible or unquestioned. Through works such as *Purdah* and *Honour Killing*, Dharker foregrounds the female voice that has historically been silenced, rendering visible lived realities of women negotiating the boundaries of faith, tradition, and personal autonomy. Her speakers dismantle the conflation of divine will with patriarchal control, rejecting the idea that modesty, obedience, and self-effacement are natural or inevitable markers of femininity. The theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Bell Hooks, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and feminist theologians like Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas illuminate how Dharker's work is both a critique and a reclamation. Butler's notion of gender performativity explains the veil and other cultural signifiers as socially constructed acts, while Spivak's concept of subalternity underscores the urgency of Dharker's decision to give the silenced woman her own narrative agency. Intersectional feminist thought, as articulated by hooks and Mohanty, helps reveal that these struggles are never singular; they are shaped by religion, class, diaspora, and postcolonial histories. What emerges from Dharker's oeuvre is neither a wholesale rejection of religion nor an uncritical embrace of tradition, but rather a nuanced, deeply human demand for self-definition. By stripping away the literal and metaphorical "black coat" of imposed identity, Dharker's poetic subjects refuse to be passive bearers of inherited norms. They assert the right to inhabit faith and culture on their own terms, to renegotiate the meanings of belonging, and to claim space for the body and the voice as sites of autonomy. In challenging both religious patriarchy and cultural essentialism, Dharker's poetry does more than narrate the struggles of Muslim women; it destabilizes the very systems that naturalize their oppression. It stands as a testament to the transformative potential of art — to speak from the margins, to resist erasure, and to imagine new configurations of identity in which religion, culture, and gender coexist without subjugation. Her work compels readers and critics alike to confront uncomfortable truths about how power operates, and, crucially, to envision a world in which faith and freedom are not mutually exclusive. Her poetry does not reject religion wholesale but instead challenges its patriarchal interpretations, advocating for a personal and autonomous engagement with faith. The tension between inherited identity and self-determined identity emerges as a central theme in Dharker's work, aligning her with postcolonial feminist discourse. By employing accessible yet layered imagery, Dharker makes the politics of gender, religion, and culture comprehensible across cultural boundaries, thus expanding the feminist poetic canon.

Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex.* Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Routledge, 2006.

Cixous, Hélène. *The Laugh of the Medusa.* Signs, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.* Stanford Law Review, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

Dharker, Imtiaz. *Purdah and Other Poems.* Oxford University Press, 1989.

---. *I Speak for the Devil.* Penguin, 2001.

---. *Over the Moon.* Bloodaxe Books, 2014.

Kassian, Mary A. *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism With the Church*. Rev. ed., Crossway Books, 2005.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity.* Duke University Press, 2003.

Rich, Adrienne. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985.* W. W. Norton & Company, 1986.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.