From Toru Dutt to Kamla Das and from Sarojini Naidu to Suniti Namjoshi, women writers in English display a poignant, ironic and profound collective voice against the institutional subjugation of women in the Indian society. Apart from challenging the phallogocentric discourse of Indian writings amidst the growing consciousness of female marginalization, social discrimination, sexual oppression, gender distinction and bigotry, these writers blatantly question the patriarchal territoriality, reject gender stereotyping and dismantle the oppressive social and physical segregation of the two sexes - the superior, authoritative and domineering men, and the subaltern, sub human, self effacing women. Consequently, women’s struggle for freedom from the religious and social prescripts, self-identity and realization, pursuit for equity and freedom occur as recurring themes in the contemporary Indian English poetry.

Imtiaz Dharker is one such itinerant diasporic writer who uses multifarious mediums – poetry, painting and documentaries to depict the plight and to raise her voice against the subaltern status of women especially the Muslim women across the globe. Through her poetry, Imtiaz Dharker brings forth the issues singular to women – their unmitigated exploitation, their passivity in the face of patriarchy, conformity to norms, and the rampant social hostility. Her writings also highlight the tensions resulting from the binaries of tradition and modernism; the homeland and the diasporic location of displacement, and between the losing battle of remaining rooted and going global. This paper titled ‘Women as Subalterns: A Study of Imtiaz Dharker’s Poetry’ is an attempt to explore how Dharker through her writings tries to underscore the subjugation of women in the society and accentuates why women themselves need to revolt against the ensuing bias and oppression perpetuated by gender politics. Concomitantly, she
also highlights the adversities, repression and the incessant trials and tribulations which women, especially those belonging to orthodox patriarchal families, face throughout their lives. A cosmopolitan Muslim herself, Dharker presents the confluence of three cultures-Pakistani, British and Indian, to underscore the power dynamics which robs women of their identity and self-esteem. Through her works, she demonstrates the flagrant violation of their human rights in terms of freedom of expression, choices and decisions. A votary of equality and identity for the suppressed and marginalized womanhood, she raises basic humanistic and feminist issues and questions the Radicals for undermining the competence and potential of women. Although her collections of poetry especially ‘The Purdah’ poems pronouncedly expose the vicious polarized sensibilities in the Muslim society which she has studied and observed from close quarters, her pragmatic vision encompasses the plight and predicament of all those who lead a life of oblivion and anonymity behind both visible and invisible yet invincible Purdah in the non-Muslim world as well. Lamenting the lack of freedom and opportunity to women, Dharker uses her poetry and visual art as a tool to unveil all those women who are relegated only to hearth and home, and subjected to ceaseless mental and physical harassment and agony by the obliterating chauvinistic male hegemonic influence. Thus, although her focus is more on the Muslim women, her vehement denunciation and acerbic outburst against institutionalized victimization of women is inclusive of all women in general.

Dharker’s vociferous outcry against this ill-treatment and suppression is most potently encased in her collections “Purdah and Other Poems” (1989), and “I speak for the Devil”(2003). Exploring primarily the matrix of home, cultural displacement, communal conflicts and gender politics, Dharker highlights the unmitigated suffering and struggle of women for empowerment and emancipation and the dichotomy between the ideal state of affairs and the reality. Purdah I and II, for instance, enunciate the atrocities and injustice meted out to the women who remain passive stakeholders in society and become the mute victims of emotional and physical violence generated through the culture of Purdah. Dharker rightly perceives it as a potent mode of seclusion and an instrument of subjugation. Regarded by the Muslims as an epitome of feminine modesty, the hijab or Veil is, in fact, a means to control the lives of women on the flimsy pretext of protection. It not only leads to the physical segregation of the two sexes but also imposes on women to conceal their form and cover their bodies and head.

Dharker’s mordant outburst at the religious intransigence manifests most potently in her condemnation of the misuse of Purdah as a safety against prying eyes of strange men. She not
only overtly protests against the despotic proscription of the Islamic society but also exhibits her empathy for all those women who are suffocated, confined and trapped by the social constructs under the hegemonic control of the religious fundamentalists. Under the garb of religious diktats, unwarranted and iniquitous rules are devised which are detrimental to the psyche and individuality of women.

A critique against the institutionalization of irrational and absolute power wrested in the hands of men, the collection “Purdah” out rightly censures the Muslim male dominion which is despotic and brutal towards the female sex. Dharker denounces the hypocrisy of those men who instead of reining in their own animalism take pride in veiling and incarcerating women. The castration and exploitation of women which she talks about is not restricted to the Muslim society but has a menacing presence in the outside world as well. Consequently, both the literal and metaphorical Purdah may be deemed as a double edged weapon for it not only impedes the assimilation of the self in the society but also strains and sifts the outer world and allows only a fraction of it to reach the self, hidden behind the obligatory veil. Moreover, it has a far reaching and incisive connotation of women as propagators of evil and promoters of lust. A regressive tool, Purdah only leads to depravation and degeneration of the self, leading only, as Dharker rightly says, “To doors opening inward and inward again”.

What perplexes Dharker further is that even marriages become a pretext of intellectual and sexual exploitation. Ideally a relationship of lifelong bonding and sharing, in reality marriages here entail a business deal between men involving monetary transactions or sheer convenience. Denied any say, preference or individual choice, women have no option but to accede to the edict and endure a life of ignominy and suffering. Dharker potently portrays the insalubrious business prepositions where the sale and purchase of women is a norm even in the diasporic world. She posits thus:

They have all been sold and bought

The girls I knew

Unwilling virgins who had been taught

Especially in this stranger’s land to bind

their brightness tightly round,
whatever they might wear
in the purdah of the mind. (PAOP 7)

Dharker, thus, questions the justness of the domestic spaces within the patriarchal society which relegates women to sheer drudgery and perceives them merely as an object of sexual pleasure, a facilitator and a breeder of posterity. Agonized by the distortion and misinterpretation of religion, Dharker even questions the justness of religion. Ideally the guiding force in life, it in place of giving succor and justice becomes an instrument of injustice, exploitation, violence and gratuitous oppression of women. She indicts the suppressive prescriptions of the Islamic social and religious setup which denies a dignified identity to women, forcing them to pander to the male ego and fancies. Deeming it as a brazen desecration of women’s freedom to dress and express, she uses her poetry to subtly protest against this tradition. Dharker ridicules the convention of ideal demeanor expected from women in ‘A Woman’s Place’, wherein she writes:

Mouths must be watched, especially
If you’re a woman. A smile
Should be stifled with the sari-end. (PAOP 32)

Indeed, it is not only the Muslim community but also the patriarchal conformist Hindu families, especially in the rural India, which enforce discriminatory and restrictive decrees on the female sex. All privileges pertaining to education, health, food and respect are reserved for the men folk and women exist on the margins-unwanted, uncared for and unsung. The world may be changing for the better but the radicals, irrespective of religion, resist change and any attempts at initiating value-oriented modernity. Insisting on conformity to age old obsolete customs, they vociferously condemn, impede and resist any attempts to initiate women emancipation in the society. Cognizant of the dichotomy between the isolation, the seclusion, the confinement and the slavish existence of women in the Indian Sub continent on one hand, and the growing number of liberated, emancipated and empowered women in the west on the other, Dharker is intolerant of the polemics of gender inequality. Consequently, through her works she expounds and explicates this ubiquitous patriarchal flagellation.
The rebellious ‘self’ that Dharker presents in her poems, while being critical of the hypocrisy of the socio-cultural and socio-religious dogmatism, is herself a victim of patriarchal marginalization. Denouncing religious sanctions against women in the name of family honour, in her poem ‘Honour Killing’ from her collection *I Speak for the Devil*, she avers:

This black veil of a faith

That made me faithless

To myself.

That tied my Mouth,

Gave my God a devils’ face

And muffled my own voice. (ISFD 13)

Quite sardonically, Dharker also presents how a young girl is expected to show modesty and reticence and is made aware of her sexuality by others who seem more conscious of her physical growth than the innocent child herself:

Of careful carrying /What we do not own

Between the thighs a sense of sin.

One day they said

She was old enough to learn some shame.

She found it came quite naturally (PAOP 3)

The collection *I Speak for the Devil* not only addresses gender issues pertaining to the limited space available to women across religions and societies, it also encourages the oppressed and marginalized women to embark on a journey of introspection, self-discovery and reincarnation. It eulogizes the spirit of womanhood and urges them to revolt and break free from these constraining and humiliating social constructs. This collection celebrates the new beginning, the rise of a phoenix out of its own ashes for a woman who “taking off the skin,/and then the
face the flesh./ The womb” (ISFD 13), dares to rebel, and ultimately finds her own moorings and identity. Dharker urges women to cast off nationality, religion and gender to explore afresh their space, identity and life. Hers is a dynamic and pragmatic feminist voice in Indian English poetry which questions the unjust social practices which impede the psychological and intellectual awakening of women and inflict a rather paralyzing, numbing and deadening influence on the psyche of women. This aspect is most explicitly presented when Dharker compares Purdah to a coffin in the line:

The cloth fans out against the skin

Much like the earth that falls

On coffins after they put dead men in. (p 3PAOP)

Apart from denouncing the cultural paradigm of treating women as “a clod of earth and the roots too…” (Purdah), Dharker also highlights the glaring dichotomy between how a Mosque—the abode of the God which should in principle be above all man-made discriminations, in fact, promotes and propagates bias against women. By denying them entry into the premise on the pretext that their presence may cause distraction to the praying men, the misconstruction of woman as a temptress whose very sight is sinful for the “virtuous” male is reinforced and ironically God seems to have given into man’s whims and fancies. Such a fallacious proliferation is confined not only to the mother land but has numerous takers in the diasporic world too. In fact, religious orthodoxy in terms of customs, traditions and conventions has typically been used by men to control women. The scenario is much the same even in the diasporic homelands. The exposure to a more liberal culture abroad especially in the west is deliberately negated by instilling the fear of retribution for not adhering to religious conventions.

In fact, the implanted inferiority of the ‘fairer’ sex, lack of opportunity and social security, inaccessibility to liberal cultural values coupled with the insistence on upholding national, cultural and religious identity further impede women emancipation. Consequently, even during the process of acculturation, those who wish to break free from cultural and social bondage to assimilate with the other cultures find themselves torn between not only the two cultural polarities, gender binaries and racial prejudices but also by the fear of retribution filled in their minds by the custodians of religion. This biased perception of religion is indeed worrisome for it forces one half of the society to be wary of the other, lead a life of deprivation and remain at
the mercy of men-folk for their sustenance. While lamenting the issues of gender binaries operative within the orthodox familial and social set-up which refuses to give up conventionality to embrace a more liberal and emancipated setup, Imtiaz Dharker’s poetry also highlights the cultural incommensurability in the diasporic environs.

Indubitably, Dharker unearths the self-effacing and deadening impact of such restrictions on the consciousness and individuality of women across the world. Relegated to mere domesticity, women are expected to cater to the needs of the family and to be at the beck and call of their fathers, brothers or husbands and most often than not they submit to their fate. In fact, these curbs and restrictions have been so internalized by women down the centuries that they accept and conform to these and in turn become perpetrators of social discrimination and aggression against other women in the family. Devoid of option and voice themselves, they have no option but to mould their daughters to accede to the patriarchal laws. Dharker’s poem “Choice” subtly depicts how this transformation seeps into the daughters who too submit to their fate without resisting and rebelling:

Mother, I find you staring back at me.
When did my body agree
To wear your face? (PAOP, 42)

Correspondingly, Dharker’s poem “Another Woman”, quite scathingly, summaries the ennui and the monotony of the life of a common lower middle class woman whose liberty is confined to buying ‘methi’ and for whom the taste of radish is a sign of ‘extravagance’. It is, indeed, a ubiquitous phenomenon that a woman, far from being appreciated for her talent and adroitness in managing the household chores, is often ridiculed, cursed and abused. She cannot even complain for “Nothing gave her the right/to speak” (PAOP 39). Similarly, her poem “A Woman’s Place” depicts the plight of the marginalized woman, the “other” in the society. Dharker’s outburst is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion:

One is not born a woman; one becomes one…..the situation of woman is that she…a free and autonomous being like all creatures…nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.(1984:29)
Relentless in her condemnation of the stereotyping of gender roles, Dharker, like most other feminists, deplores the lack of opportunity and freedom given to women. Her poems poignantly portray the plight of innumerable women whose destiny is sealed by men while they remain mute spectators, coerced to follow the diktat:

This was the house she had been sent to

The man she had been bound to

The future she had been born into. (PAOP 38)

Thus forced and hurled into marriage, there is no reprieve for her from this forced “domestication”. As the title aptly suggests, she is yet again “the Other Woman” in this vicious cycle where man by virtue of being physically strong, assertive, economically independent and socially empowered continues to be the cause and propagator of unmitigated suffering and grieving for the woman. Perhaps, death is the only escape for them.

A custodian of rights for women, Dharker urges women to take up cudgels against such atrocities and forced subalternity. In fact, in portraying their plight through her poetry and drawings, she shows her allegiance to the imperative need of breaking free from the shackles of restrictive and repressive social milieu. In fact Imtiaz Dharker belongs to rather small group of writers who openly challenge the patriarchal power structure. She rightly perceives this female subjugation as not culture or religion specific but as an enforced slavery that permeates both time and space, as pervasive in the diasporic world as in the homeland. Her stand is vindicated by the fact that even in the socially awakened, developed and liberated western society, there are innumerable instances of domestic violence, exploitation and servitude. Ironically, despite avowals of liberty and equality, the west or the so- called modern society is not free from gender disparity. Even an “English boy”, as Dharker rightly points out in Purdah II, expects his woman to be on her “knees”:

There you are with your English boy

Who was going to set you free,

Trying to smile and be accepted

always on your knees. (PAOP 10)
Incontestably, Dharker, like Gauri Deshpande, Eunice de Souza, Fahtima Riyaz and Kishwer Naheed, poses a threat to the hostile hegemonic paradigm of patriarchal social setup. However, she does not sentimentalize or glorify their travails. She rather celebrates their feminine mystique and insurmountable strength to endure by her assertion in “No-Man’s Land”:

It is the woman who knows

You can take in/the invader, time after time,

And still be whole. (PAOP 51)

Optimistic that things will change for the better, she urges women to fight for their own rights and individuality. She prompts women to unleash the latent energy and strength against their oppressors. Her poem ‘The Word’ clearly suggests this:

It is pure power, ….

It is waiting to be fed/let loose, one day,

When its moment comes,/upon a world unready

To be stung from sleep …. (PAOP 58)

For she is confident of the potential of women. As if to awaken them to their own strength, She says:

You hold so many possibilities,

Just inside the skin

You could be any number of things. (PAOP 60)

And goes on to assert:

The image is never really fixed

Allow, for one moment, your guard
To slip, and all the world will catch a glimpse

Of the things you have kept hidden all this time. (PAOP 60)

Undoubtedly, it is only through self-realization and re-invention that a woman can succeed in establishing her individuality and freedom from the constrictive and proscriptive social and religious norms.

Thus, Dharker’s poetry while discreetly rebellious gives a whiff of the prophetic and imminent change in the perception and psyche of the society. She anticipates this revolution which will accord equality and freedom to men and women. Her words “At last a sign, behind the veil, of life” (9) may be construed as prophetic for there are visible signs of change. Essentially, voices like that of Dharker show hope of better tomorrow for the silent nay silenced strata of society, who are the dehumanized victims of exclusion and partial social and cultural constructs. In highlighting the feudal orthodoxy in the world, she unravels the tension and discord between the idealistic and the factual status of women- their subaltern existence at the margins of the society. However, her anguished outcry is not merely aimed at exposing the discord but an attempt to merge the two binaries so as to reconcile the apparently insuperable dichotomy between the ideal and the real state of women in our society.

Works cited

