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Research Article



The Discourse of Silence as a Testimony of Resistance: A Study with Reference to Select Poems by Imtiaz Dharker

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Abstract

The present paper aims to inquire the synthesis of resistance in Imtiaz Dharker's poetry and how she invokes the concept by using silence as a core element to convey it. Through the select poems, the question of whether resistance in her poems is recognized and intentional shall be addressed. It also intends to move beyond the definitional spectrum of resistance and analytically find the lines of dissent which Dharker incorporates. This endeavor shall resolve the conceptual parameter of resistance and how silence can also be a crucial part of it. There shall also be an attempt to find how silence is entrapped and plays an important role in the formulation of active protest against oppressive regimes. The poems represent both intentional and unintentional silence, and through the lens of resistance, the paper facilitates a critical

introspection of the same to find if it originates from long term acculturation of methodologies of rebellion or simply embodies an innovative inquiry.

Keywords: Silence, Resistance, Discourse, Power, Protest, Dissent, Defiance, Enforcement, Oppression

The theme of resistance in literature is a compelling exploration of individuals or communities defying oppressive forces, be they political, social or personal. It transcends genres and time periods, providing a rich tapestry of narratives that delve into the complexities of human resilience and the pursuit of justice. One prominent manifestation of resistance in literature is the political struggle against authoritarian regimes. George Orwell's *1984* stands as a classic example, depicting a dystopian society where the protagonist, Winston Smith, rebels against the suppressive government of Big Brother. The novel serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked power and the indomitable human spirit's capacity to resist. In a similar manner, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* explores resistance in the face of a theocratic regime that subjugates women. The protagonist, Offred, navigates a world where fertile women are reduced to mere vessels for reproduction. Her internal resistance, expressed through forbidden relationships and secret rebellions, highlights the human instinct to resist dehumanization. Literature also portrays social resistance against prevailing norms and prejudices. Harper Lee's *To kill a Mockingbird* illustrates the struggle against racial injustice in Southern America. Atticus Finch's defense of Tom Robinson, an African American wrongly accused of raping a white woman, embodies the resistance against deeply ingrained societal prejudices. Whether resisting political tyranny, social injustice or personal struggles, literary works provide a nuanced exploration of the human spirit's capacity to engage the oppressive forces.

Imtiaz Dharker, who comes from a place of radical dislocation has written poems which are both grounded and liberating. Living the exhilarating life at interstices, her words come together to knit broken narratives of silence and resistance, thereby creating a new vision not just for herself, but also for the readers. Writing for her, therefore becomes an act of resistance, which is at times obvious, and at times, masked. She proclaims a reclaiming of the self despite the world's attempts to confine and stabilize her identity. Her verses question and contest the dominant codes of information. Adrienne Rich has talked about some of the tragic and destructive forms of silencing that women experience: "namelessness, denial, secrets, taboo subjects, erasure, false-naming, non-naming, encoding, omission, veiling, fragmentation and lying" (Rich 1978, 18). Silencing is often used to isolate people who are not empowered in the context of their gender, race and class. It is also at times employed for significant modes of oppression. Adam Jarowski mentions, "Silence is oppressive when it is characteristic of a dominant group and when the group is not allowed to break its silence by its own choice or by any means of any media controlled by the power group" (Jarowski 1988).

The discourse of women's silence is trivialized, their narratives are reduced to not having a larger, collective voice and their experiences are not considered universal. Dharker, through her poetry, portrays the ways in which women are breaking out of this silence and the revolution

in their silences itself. Her struggle is of formulating changes which might not be ground breaking but they are certainly momentous and transformative. She reflects upon the methods of suppression and lets her speakers develop revolutionary communication methods, sometimes through a proactive rebellion and sometimes through a subtle and underscored silence. Some poets have asserted that silence is not only powerful, but also positive. Dale Spender mentions about “some healthy silences, some happy silences, some humorous silences” (Spender 1990, 106) in women’s lives. Gwendolyn Brooks proposes that women also choose and control the different types of “delicious” (Brooks 1971) solitude in her poem “Aloneness”. However, at the same time, Spender tells us that silence is often imposed upon the women- “the resounding silence of women is more often a tragic silence” (106).

In the poem “Purdah I”, we find that the voices of resistance are subtly embedded in the portrayal of women’s lives within a traditional, conservative setting. Dharker vividly describes the physical and emotional confines imposed by the purdah, a practice of seclusion or veiling commonly associated with some South Asian cultures. The poet employs powerful imagery to depict the oppressive nature of purdah, suggesting a sense of confinement and immobility. These stark visuals convey the physical restrictions imposed upon women within the framework of patriarchal society. However, within these restrictive confines, Dharker subtly introduces moments of resistance. She incorporates seemingly small gestures which become symbols of individual expression and personal agency and represent a quiet rebellion against the limitations enforced by purdah. The language she uses is evocative and powerful creating a sense of tension between the external oppression and the internal resilience of the women. The poet acknowledges the struggles faced by these women while also highlighting their strength and tenacity in maintaining a sense of identity and self-expression-

“She half remembers things
from someone else’s life,
perhaps from yours, or mine-
carefully carrying what we do not own:
between the thighs, a sense of sin.” (14-18)

Dharker documents several modes of dissent, defiance and transgression which erupt from sustained misery and suffering. One of the speakers in “Purdah II’ cries-

“Break cover.
Break cover and let us see
the ghosts of the girls with tell-tale lips.
We’ll blindfold the spies.” (1-4)

We notice that she doesn’t just create an individual expression of desire to break through all the shackles, but it is also a collective attempt to involve others in solidarity in similar situations. She creates her own foregrounding of dissent, where a lover and a daughter shall both refuse to be fenced in by any of the demarcations. Therefore, both Naseem and a daughter who has finally declared her own independence are the same. The lines in section III of the poem “Choice” establish the same idea.

“I spent years hiding from your face,
the weight of your arms, warmth

of your breath. Through feverish nights,
dreaming of you, the watchdogs of virtue
and obedience crouched on my chest.” (1-5)

“The watchdogs of virtue and obedience” are precisely the oppressive agencies which the patriarchal society enforces. Most of such oppression is usually religiously sanctioned and women entrapped in a diasporic community face a double threat. The first is the realization that they cannot go back to their roots because their existence in a familiar space is also negated and the second is that they fail to find emotional stability in the domestic space of the new country to which they have migrated. The speaker henceforth comes to an acceptance that her safe refuge shall not be offered by her religious identity or her affiliation to the geographical boundaries. She needs to move beyond the defined specimen of identity formation, which however vulnerable, will still be eminent because she would reconfigure herself entirely on her own. Therefore, the lines in section I of “Choice” state-

Finally, who will she be
when the choices are made,
when the choosers are dead,
and of the men I love, the teeth are left
chattering with me underground?
Just the sum of me
and this or that
other?
Who can she be but, helplessly,
herself?” (9-18)

This ‘she’ has grown beyond the familiar dialectics of belonging, unbelonging, assimilation and now invents herself through hybridity. The quest for alternative paradigms of identity stems from resistance and becomes the testimony of her resilience as she discusses the possibilities of redefinitions. Dharker thereby evolves as a poetic voice which questions all binaries and moves into a space where the rigidly insisted dichotomies fade. She does not succumb to any essentialist impositions which women are often confronted with.

The collective vision of resistance also echoes through section VIII of the poem “Purdah II”. Dharker elaborates the multiplicity of not just the voices, but also of experiences. However, her mode is not just a blurted-out statement, which is instinctive. It is a carefully grafted, effective and productive meaning which seizes our consciousness and yet, is short of any embellishments.

“I can see behind their veils,
and before they speak
I know their tongues, thick
with the burr of Birmingham
or Leeds.” (6-10)

Similar theme recurs in section XIII, where she represents that the confrontations faced by all the women are essentially same. She asserts that all of them are exploited and finds the

unifying element that would work as the interpretive key to unlock the meaning of resistance figuratively. These voices are different, they emerge from disparate situations and yet they are-

“Shaking your box to hear
how freedom rattles...
one coin, one sound.” (4-6)

In the poem, “A Woman’s Place”, Dharker goes on to envision silence as an intrinsic part of feminist discourse. By examining the essence of power that patriarchy perpetrates upon women, the poem has the metaphor of a woman who should only cry in front of a mirror, demonstrating that her pain has no place in a male-dominated setting. She cannot dissolve the barrier between speech and silence. Henceforth,

“If occasionally you need to scream, do it
alone but in front of a mirror
where you can see the strange shape the mouth makes
before you wipe it off.” (6-9)

In the poem, “They’ll say, she must be from another country”, she masterfully explores silence as a response. The woman’s deliberate choice to remain silent becomes a multifaceted act of resistance against external judgements, linguistic expectations and the reduction of identity to simplistic labels. The phrase “they’ll say” anticipates the collective judgements and assumptions that the speaker will face. The poem begins with the societal gaze directed at her suggesting that external perceptions based on cultural differences will shape the narrative surrounding her. This act protects her from the potential misinterpretations, thereby becoming a potent tool for avoiding any format of categorizations. By not vocalizing her name or origin, she denies those around her the opportunity to neatly fit her into predefined boxes. This also in turn challenges the societal impulse to label and stereotypes based on superficial criteria. The following lines introduce the idea that she, as an act of defiance, has chosen to withhold aspects of her personality.

“And I’ll 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.” (68-73)

“The Right Word” is a powerful poem which delves into the aftermath of conflict and the limitations of language in capturing the profound human experiences associated with violence. The political silence in the poem is an exploration of the inadequacy of words to convey the depth of trauma, grief and the impact of cruelty. It opens with the striking portrayal of terrorism, introducing the character of a “terrorist” lurking in the shadows. The use of this charged term immediately establishes a political context. Dharker vividly describes the collective decrepitude of a generation which is inherently bound to horrifying impacts of violence. The title “The right word” therefore takes on an ironic tone, emphasizing that even the most precise language falls short in capturing the true human cost of violence. By introducing the terrorist as no anomaly: he looks like her own child, and a child of everybody

else's- she makes sure that the absence of an appropriate word to define this boy's identity is characterized by silence, which becomes a powerful form of resistance. In the face of political violence, silence becomes a space where personal identities are still preserved. Dharker therefore puts forward the ethical and moral dimensions in the face of conflict. She proposes that such events must be approached with empathy and a deeper understanding of the associated suffering.

“One word for you.
Outside my door,
his hand too steady,
his eyes too hard
is a boy who looks like your son, too.” (24-28)

“City in the Sea” is another haunting and evocative poem that explores themes of displacement, identity and the relentless passage of time. At the heart of the poem, there lies a profound exploration of silence, which operates as a central motif weaving through the verses. The poem begins with a description of a once thriving city that now lies in ruin. The language used to describe the city creates an atmosphere of desolation. The silence here is not merely an absence of sound but a pervasive stillness that envelops the entire city and it is intimately connected with the displacement of city's inhabitants. The speaker reflects upon the great cries that once echoed through the city, suggesting a vibrant and lively community. However, the subsequent desertion has left behind a void which is both physical and auditory. Dharker utilizes natural imagery to accentuate the central theme. The portrayal of the sea as mute configures the pervasive quietude that has settled all over the city. Nature, typically associated with beautiful responses, becomes a silent witness to the city's utter degradation and fragmentation. However, this stillness is also a form of preservation, a way for the city to endure the ravages of time and displacement. It becomes a shield against the external forces that have transformed the city, allowing it to retain a semblance of dignity in its silent repose. The speaker also wonders about the cause of the city's downfall, contemplating who destroyed it. The unresolved nature of this inquiry adds a layer of mystery to the silence, as if the city itself holds the answers in its muted testimony. The poem therefore resists the silence of the city and attempts to break through and resurrect its story.

To conclude, it can be stated that Dharker ensures the visibility of the resistant act. However, she doesn't quite clarify if all kinds of oppositional action should be readily visible to others and be recognised as resistance. In the large-scale protest movements, members confront their targets directly and openly. Political scientist, James Scott, who researched on peasant politics challenged this proposition by framing the concept of “everyday” acts of resistance. We therefore come to an understanding that there is a significant difference between everyday resistance and conventional resistance. However, visibility continues to be a necessary prerequisite for the recognition of resistance. Dharker too devices specific methodologies for resistance in her poems. At times, she manipulates the speaker's behaviour in order to encourage or discourage recognition. The acts of subversion are often overtly oppositional and yet may go unrecognised because the poet has deliberately chosen to do so. Contrary to this, some of the acts are observable but may not be necessarily recognised. She thereby illustrates

that recognition of resistance shall depend upon the aspiration of the speaker. Sometimes, the speaker might purposefully conceal or try to hide the intention behind the subversive act. But at the same time, she makes no confirmation if resistance truly needs to be identified by others, in order to be considered. And it is perhaps because of this conceptualisation that she doesn't provoke reactions from the reader and largely depends on the mechanism of silence. She speculates that beyond the physical and material, resistance can also be accomplished by symbolic gestures like silence. However, in doing so, the question of intent of those exercising the silence is left blurred. It is left to the consciousness of the reader to find if it is an indicator of resistance. As Dharker delineates resistance through silence, she also gives it a sort of vagueness, which limits the potential of the poems to treat contentious issues.

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