

Illusion of Home: A Study of Selected Works of Imtiaz Dharker and Kunti

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Abstract—*The notion of home has always remained a problematic theme in the work of any woman writer cutting across caste, class and religion. No wonder how strongly she grapples with her sense of belonging, her efforts have always been laced with a struggle to coherently define her own space within the four walls. The thrust of this paper is to explore the dynamics of the troubled zone of domesticity, desires and disappointments in man-woman relationships by studying the selected works of Imtiaz Dharker and Hindi Dalit poet Kunti. The differences between the two lie in their different social and geographical locations yet the two are united in their pain, anguish and muffled existence, seeking their own voice and freedom inside their respective personal domains.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Who owns the place called home? What is the place of woman inside it? The role and responsibilities of a woman in a household have been clearly delineated in the brahminical discourse written during the seventh century CE that continue to exert a considerable influence on the existence of the half of world's population even today. The discourse is deeply ingrained in the fabric of society disciplining women's mind and body and cuts across religion, caste and class. According to Patrick Olivelle, *Manusmriti*, a legal text or Dharamsutra, is a "normative text. It contains norms of correct behavior and action. It tells people what to do but does not tell us what people actually did"[23]. This met narrative or brahminical discourse clearly stated the different ways to secure women's cooperation in the society in which, economic dependency on the male head of her family and use of force when required" [1] were held supreme. To sustain the moral standards of the society, women's subjugation to the patriarch is "institutionalized in the brahminical code of conduct"(ibid). According to the vedic text, "a wife cannot act independently in matters relating to the law. She should never go against her

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17

husband and keep her eyes, speech and actions under strict control” [23]. Thus the secondary status of the woman inside home has been duly sanctified in the religious scriptures.

2. WOMAN, HOME AND A BROKEN MIRROR

Though the notion of home brings along with it themes of belonging and relationships but it also brings along the baggage of stifled desires and disappointments. A woman defines herself in relation to people around her and the societal roles attributed to her. In conforming to different roles, her own identity gets blurred and lacks in clear outline. Hence, gradually she becomes more and more disintegrated as she tries to obey the rules set for the pre determined patriarchal mold. Her struggle comes alive in the following lines of Dharker “Why is this mirror broken? / It makes sense of my disordered face” [2]. The image of broken mirror highlights the fragmentation in the life of a poet critiquing her fragmented identity. Out of the two selected poets, Dharker has come out unrestrained in debunking the drudgery of marriage and the patriarchal code that confined the spirit of a woman as silenced and disciplined beast. Her poetry has taken a poignant critique of marital violence, dissatisfying physical love, denying of speech, and life sapping codes and rituals thrust upon a woman in the name of morality. The different forces strive together in pushing her on the verge of insanity. Her poetry seems to find solace in chaos that appropriates more with her inner tumult and distraught spirit than the sane orderliness. Here the poetry becomes a mode of escape, salvaging her from the chaos and disorder strewn around the so called normal life.

The poetry also delves into the sphere of man-woman relationship. Woman’s life seemed to revolve around the master of the house where her own position remained subservient. “When you came home / we crept around you quietly, / massaged your feet” [3]. The position of woman as dependent and subdued being has been pointed out but it was not without a conflict. In the subsequent lines Dharker is articulating her displeasure, “You filled the house with children / sofas, servants,. . . / but the walls were always bare” (ibid 12-14). The house was filled with the objects, furniture and responsibilities but devoid of warmth and feelings. Like her spirits, the walls too remained desolate and bare. Here, the decision power inside the home remained with the master while as she was left brooding in the background. The poem takes a sudden turn when the poet announces her departure as, “I left one day / you never wrote” [ibid. 21-22]. The poem alters into a dialogue where her sudden departure from home leaves a bold message behind but also comments on her null and void relationship. Her exit hardly seems to cut any ice with the master of the house. Lack of any reaction, places her bonding in the

realm of uncertainty. There is a disillusionment and despair as if all her words are falling on the deaf ears or in a vacuum. The relationship she is longing for, itself becomes a trap that smothered her sighs. According to Haider, “all humans need both intimacy and freedom but woman focus on intimacy while as men on later” [15]. There is a constant struggle between addressing her own need for intimacy while surrendering her freedom to the men’s authority. Thus the man-woman relationship remains fractured and compromised. “this hunger is shouting for attention. / it wants your soul” [4]. Even the love making remains distrustful where the complete union remains unattainable. “Fold laps at fold / - - - / more completely than we would ever dare” [5]. The poet finds more intimacy in their clothes lying one above the other than their own bodies. Here the poetry becomes an effective medium to articulate the vacuum in her relationship that has no other way of being addressed and subsequently took its toll on their co-existence.

The notion of a silent woman and her failing sanity has also been critiqued in the poetry and debated frequently. The role of state in “refusal of access to public language” [23] has been comprehensively discussed. Thus when Dharker wrote, “Your tongue is fighting me / this sounds familiar, but / the source is new” [6]. She is referring to all those ways and means both within and outside her home that worked towards silencing her. She has rather taken a satirical view of this silencing in her poems. Her obsession with her denied speech has re-surfaced frequently. “Keeping my tongue still / all of my life / has been a highly recommended skill” (ibid 13-15). The irony in the lines is hard to ignore. She is commenting on her survival technique in the patriarchal society where she is disparaging her tongue as “rebellious” and “out of combat” (ibid 35).

Another crucial themes that has surfaced in Dharker’s work is the motif of insanity. According to her, liberty for a woman comes with its own price i.e. insanity and word like ‘freedom’ is an incomprehensible truth for a sane married woman. “Naseem set fire to the bed /and promised next time he’d be in it” [7]. The underlying violence in her poetry makes it a voice of opposition where a man and woman are interlocked in a lethal combat. However the poet asserts it as the only way to liberate oneself from the drudgery of marriage. “Mary ran naked down the street / someone threw a sheet over her” (ibid. 15-16). The weird examples in the poem are seen as the moments of celebration for the poet as women tore apart the draconian code of patriarchy and acted scandalously. In the subsequent lines, poet is celebrating the liberation of womanhood by addressing all those women who did away with the sanity and slipped into an insane world. The mirth in the following lines troubles.

This is a narrow road,
But we are on it,
More of us everyday,
Shouting out loud to one another
As if we'd met before, somewhere.(29-34)

The theme of domestic violence has also been deliberated upon in her poetry. The quite zone of domesticity is interrupted by the sighs and cries of victimized and physically assaulted woman that are not to be shared with the outside world. Rather the victim's cries are stifled under the code of civility and all the efforts are directed towards the concealment of truth.

Rehmat Ali's wife sat down
Quietly and said
Someone else had open up
Her head. (ibid. 1-4)

Here the poetry transforms into a testimony of the victim and reflects the role of state in sanctifying such act. In her typical style of tongue-in-cheek manner she highlights the highs and lows in a man-woman relationships. As she points out, "Men have a rare genius/ for revenge" [8]. Her query can be juxtaposed with the dictum of Manusmirti that sanctified the "use of force if required" by the husband, and found acceptance in the society as well. The discourse further goes on to say that, " day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families" and "the power to use violence vests in the husband and it is recommended as the means to ensure control over the wife and in monitoring her behavior more generally" [1]. Dharker though commenting on this aspect of marriage has turned the table on the patriarchy in her poetry. Woman in her poem on the contrary is challenging her beloved to be strong enough to sustain the relationship. Here lines from poetry become a dual where woman is boldly hinting at the perpetual violence in her lovemaking and debunks her own vulnerable image

Watch out.
I'm ready to love you
Like the grinding-stone
Loves the grain

I'm about to love you
Like the pestle pounding
Green chillies

It is not only the relationship but she is up in arms to defend her own self at her own conditions. The poet is more than aware of her vulnerable situation yet her undying spirit has waged a war against her assaulters. Unabashed she announces, "The other bastard's had his say. / Now it's my turn. / Give me half a chance" [9]. She is not only disparaging her adversary but demanding her own right to be heard.

The above lines have brought down Manusmriti's dictum in a single stroke. The whole notion of keeping a woman under a strict control has been shredded.

Ever? Control?
No, I don't think so.
Maybe once, but that
Was long ago,
I've forgotten now. [10]

The theme of freedom has come across as shunning off of the old values. The poetry underlines the urgency to break free from the age old shackles. There is a seething violence that is hard to miss in Dharker's work and a strong yearning to take control of her life. This makes it a literature of resistance and rebel.

I was really full of shit.
I got fed up being good.
It must have been a put-on anyway,
Because I was hungry to be bad,
Like craving food. [11]

The other poet Kunti has questioned and delved into the reasons responsible for her beleaguered position through her poems. The underlying impulse to break free from the conforming four wall runs throughout her poetry. As compared to Dharker her poems are more subtle yet profound. Bringing out the pathos of a trapped soul, she states the need to release herself from the shackles, "A women struggling behind the shut doors / Longs for the uninterrupted sky / Where, her mind could fly like a bird" [16]. The drudgery of marriage renders a debilitating blow to Woman's creativity while as her relationship with her man remained

elusive. There is a felt inadequacy, lack of warmth as previously expressed in the works of Dharker. The point of departure being that where as Dharker is seeking the intimacy in the bare walls radiating coldness and pile of clothes lying innocently one above the other , Kunti has taken the issue head on with her better half.

Though / you have studied
Most of the pages of my life.
Still you continue to say
You could not understand me
Nor you ever will [17]

The lost words have fail to bridge in the gaps in this failed communication. Once again, the poetry becomes a channel to venture into this deafening silence. The notion of insanity brought forth by Dharker has been replaced by the simmering anger. Kunti has compared it to a volcano or an earthquake that has a power to destroy the whole existence.

Lets do away with all the pain
Because, if it stayed for long
It will ooze out as lava
Sometimes as words, or through
Angry eyes, and may
explode this body into pieces. [18]

There is an underlying seething violence in the above lines. The poet has poignantly brought forward the threats of lack of trust in any relationship which silently kills it. Her poems are targeting male ego and the shallowness of relationships. Unlike Dharker, there is an absence of physical angle in Kunti's poems. Her poems explore the psychological perspective in the relationship where lack of clarity and too many unrealistic expectations bestowed on a woman have taken a toll on their commitment for each other

Its you men
Who desire for both in one.
As known and unknown

As slave and a lover
And then discard her
Into a stupor. [19]

Both the poets have dwell upon their search for the meaningful companionship. There is an unfulfilled desire, a search for completeness and an unrelenting struggle to coherently put forward the lurking despair in their lives before the reader. The poetry sometimes hovers on the margins of confession and that unites the two. There is a sense of strong affinity when both of them, disillusioned with the failed bondages venture into soul searching mode, trying to answer the tuff question about what they are aspiring for? The point of departure comes when Kunti is still grappling with her unanswered questions while as Dharker finds them in her aloofness. Kunti's poem problematize the issue of longing and peace in the life of a woman.

Why my mind tortures me?
Why is this agony?
That stays with me throughout
What is this thirst?
That I fail to quench? [20]

While as Dharker juggled between the sanity and isolation, she finally chooses isolation and forayed into a free zone. The severed ties seem to answer all her questions and put them at rest. At last she found her peace.

I am 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. [12]

Kunti's implacable quest into the dark nook and corner of her own mind brings the confessional element into her work. The woman in her work appears to be as intimidated with her ownself as she is with the domineering man. The poet has not spared even her own self yet refuses to admit defeat. Her internal conflict comes alive in the following lines

My thoughts run dry
I writhe and wriggle,
At war with my ownself
Simmering within
And slowly a shiver runs down
and a strange coldness
surrounds. [22]

Dharker's poems on the other hand are set out to tear apart all the conforming veils and values. Even the home she left behind fails to evoke familiarity. As she ponders, "Is this a house? / there is a number on the door, / but no name" [13]. The poet asserts her decision to walk out and then there was no looking back. The decision to shun off all ties and moving out of the house brought answers to her despair. "There's nothing here I'm afraid to lose. / Room after room of dusty corners / and mouldy shoes" [14]. Kunti found respite in piercing deeper into her inner tumult. Her poems became a way to catharsis, bringing out the pain and anguish and giving relief to her wretched soul

Thundering night
Read through my inner storm
Like a lightning and thunder
In the sky that claps
My thoughts too strike and smack
That turns a stormy night
Into a poetic rhyme.[22]

3. CONCLUSION

Both the poets Imtiaz Dharker and Kunti are registering their protest against their beleaguered position inside home. Their anger is directed against patriarchy that has negated their identity. Their poetry sees a departure from the tradition in refusing to accept the laid out terms and boldly citing out their wants and desires. The difference in the approaches lie in the fact that one is seeking liberation in the garb of insanity and isolation where all rules and rituals cease to act while as other is still trying to penetrate the dark recesses of patriarchy through her unrelenting quest. Still, both are united in their efforts to break off their pre-determined mold.

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