



Focus on Symbols and Imagery. The Symbol of the Veil: A Close Reading of Imtiaz Dharker's "Purdah I"

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Abstract- This paper examines the symbolism and imagery of the veil in Imtiaz Dharker's poem "Purdah I." The study focuses on how Dharker transforms the purdah from a physical covering into a complex symbol of female identity, social control, concealment, and psychological restriction. Through recurring images of veiling, darkness, doors, boundaries, and partial visibility, the poem explores the ways in which cultural expectations regulate women's bodies and behaviour. The analysis also considers the relationship between the veil and female sexuality, privacy, and self-perception. Dharker's use of visual and spatial imagery reveals that purdah is not merely an external practice but can become an internalized form of social conditioning. The poem ultimately presents concealment as both physical and psychological, inviting readers to consider the complex relationship between tradition, identity, visibility, and freedom.

Keywords- Imtiaz Dharker; Purdah I; veil; symbolism; imagery; female identity; patriarchy; social control; concealment; sexuality; visibility; psychological restriction.

I. Introduction

In South Asian feminist literature, the female body is rarely presented as a natural entity; it is a site that is constantly mapped, regulated, and veiled by the dictates of patriarchal honour. Born in Pakistan, raised in Glasgow, and dividing her adult life between India and the UK, Imtiaz Dharker writes from a uniquely transnational vantage point that allows her to dissect this regulation with unflinching clarity. Her seminal poem *Purdah I*, from her 1989 collection *Purdah and Other Poems*, serves as a powerful entry point into this discourse.

In it, Dharker strips the veil of its conventional religious reverence and represents it not as an indicator of devotion or pride, but as an instrument of social severance - a mobile coffin that enforces shame, isolation, and the abrupt deletion of female childhood. This paper examines the symbolic weight of the veil in *Purdah I* as a physical boundary, a burial shroud, and a psychological fracture. By placing Dharker in conversation with the sartorial politics of other Indian feminist writers - Kamala Das's enforced saree in 'An Introduction', Ismat Chughtai's suffocating quilt in *Lihaaf*, and Amrita Pritam's contested dupatta in *Pinjar* - this study argues that South Asian literature consistently weaponizes clothing to chart the boundaries of the female body and contain its autonomy.

In Imtiaz Dharker's seminal poem *Purdah I*, the veil is immediately stripped of its conventional religious reverence. It is not presented as a symbol of spiritual devotion or cultural pride, but rather as an instrument of social severance. Through intense,



suffocating imagery, Dharker elevates a simple piece of black cloth into a profound metaphor for patriarchal control, isolation, and the abrupt erasure of childhood. By analysing the symbolic weight of the veil in *Purdah I* alongside the sartorial motifs used by other Indian feminist writers like Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, and Amrita Pritam, we can understand how South Asian literature consistently uses clothing to map the boundaries of the female body.

The Architecture of Shame. The most striking aspect of the veil in *Purdah I* is its suddenness. The poem does not open with a spiritual awakening, but with a societal mandate: "One day they said / she was old enough to learn some shame." Here, Dharker frames the veil as a physical manifestation of guilt. Shame is not portrayed as an inherent human quality, but as a curriculum that young girls are forced to master the moment their bodies begin to mature. The veil becomes the uniform of this new, restrictive education.

This sudden imposition of modesty through clothing is a recurring trauma in South Asian feminist poetry. Kamala Das explores the exact same phenomenon in her fiercely confessional poem *An Introduction*. For Das, the end of childhood autonomy arrives with a strict dress code. As her body matures, society intervenes: "I was child, and later they / Told me I grew... Dress in sarees, be girl, be wife." Just as Dharker's subject is handed the *purdah*, Das's subject is forced into the saree. In both instances, the fabric acts as a boundary line drawn across a young girl's life, signalling that her physical form is no longer her own to navigate freely. The cloth is deployed to contain the threat of female sexuality, wrapping the growing body in layers of enforced respectability.

Imagery of the Coffin: The Veil as a Living Burial. As *Purdah I* progresses, Dharker's imagery grows notably darker, shifting from social critique to a chilling physical reality. She describes the sensation of putting on the veil with devastating precision, noting how the cloth fans out against the skin "much like the earth that falls / on coffins after they put dead men in." This simile is the symbolic core of the poem. The veil is not merely a garment that hides; it is a shroud that buries. Dharker equates the donning of the *purdah* to a premature death, where the vibrant, observant girl is swallowed by the black fabric. She is cut off from the light, the air, and the tangible experiences of the outside world. The cloth operates as a mobile coffin, allowing the woman to walk through the world while remaining entirely isolated from it.

The use of heavy, suffocating fabric to symbolize the burial of female autonomy resonates deeply with Ismat Chughtai's 1942 Urdu masterpiece, *Lihaaf* (The Quilt). In Chughtai's narrative, a heavy, shadowy quilt becomes a potent symbol of confinement and suppressed desire within a secluded aristocratic household. While Dharker's *purdah* isolates the woman in public, Chughtai's quilt smothers her in private. Both writers use the oppressive weight of fabric to represent the dark, hidden burdens placed upon women. The cloth in both texts is heavy enough to crush the individual beneath it, hiding the reality of female suffering from the patriarchal gaze.

The Fractured Gaze and the Alienated Self. Beyond its physical weight, the veil in *Purdah I* serves as a psychological barrier that fundamentally alters how the wearer interacts with reality. Once the girl is veiled, the world outside changes entirely. People



she has known her whole life suddenly "make different angles / in the light, their eyes aslant, a little sly." The symbol of the veil operates as a two-way mirror. It hides the woman from the world, but it also distorts her view of the world. She is alienated from her own community, transformed from a familiar child into a walking symbol of communal honour. She begins to view herself through the eyes of the patriarchy, resulting in a deep psychological dissociation. She inches past herself in the corridors, feeling like a "clod of earth," entirely disconnected from her own flesh.

This reduction of a woman to a symbol of honour through her clothing is a central theme in Amrita Pritam's classic novel *Pinjar* (The Skeleton). Set during the violent partition of India, the novel shows how the *ghunghat* (veil) and the *dupatta* (scarf) function as markers of religious and communal territory. The protagonist, Puro, finds her identity repeatedly erased and rewritten based on the clothing imposed upon her by different factions. Just as Dharker's subject is alienated from herself the moment the *purdah* falls, Pritam's Puro is stripped of her humanity and reduced to a piece of contested property. In both works, the veil dictates who the woman is allowed to be, blinding the world to the actual human being beneath the fabric.

Through the masterful use of symbol and imagery in *Purdah I*, Imtiaz Dharker captures the precise mechanics of patriarchal control. The veil is not a simple accessory; it is a physical boundary, a metaphorical coffin, and an instrument of psychological alienation. When placed in conversation with the works of Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, and Amrita Pritam, Dharker's poem stands as a vital pillar in the broader literary tradition of examining the dressed female body. These writers collectively demonstrate that in the architecture of South Asian patriarchy, clothing is consistently weaponized. The cloth is used to teach shame, bury independence, and ensure that the female subject remains quietly, permanently confined.

Conclusion

Imtiaz Dharker's "*Purdah I*" presents the veil as a powerful and multilayered symbol through which questions of female identity, visibility, sexuality, and social control are explored. The imagery of veiling, darkness, doors, boundaries, and partial visibility demonstrates that *purdah* extends beyond a physical practice and becomes a psychological condition. The woman is taught not only to cover her body but also to regulate her presence and behaviour in the public sphere. Dharker's imagery consequently reveals how external restrictions can become internalized, shaping the individual's understanding of herself. The veil thus operates simultaneously as a marker of cultural tradition, a means of concealment, and a symbol of restricted freedom. Through this complex symbolism, "*Purdah I*" encourages readers to examine the relationship between social expectations and individual identity, making the poem a significant exploration of gender, visibility, and power.

Reference

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