

Between Here and Elsewhere: The Politics of Belonging in Dharker's *The Terrorist at My Table*

Debarshi Arathdar

Abstract

Imtiaz Dharker's *The Terrorist at My Table* situates itself within the shifting terrain of postcolonial and diasporic literature, exploring the politics of belonging in a globalized world shaped by colonial legacies and contemporary anxieties. This paper examines Dharker's poetry through the theoretical frameworks of hybridity (Homi Bhabha) and diasporic identity (Stuart Hall), emphasizing how her work reflects both fragmentation and resilience in cultural selfhood. Dharker's transnational biography—Pakistani origins, Scottish upbringing, and residence in London—infuses her poetry with a layered diasporic consciousness that interrogates rigid definitions of identity, nation, and home. Through close readings of key poems such as "*The Right Word*," "*They'll Say: 'She Must Be From Another Country*,'" and "*The Habit of Departure*," the analysis highlights Dharker's use of irony, questioning, and satire to destabilize authoritative discourses of terrorism, migration, and otherness. Her work critiques exclusionary practices that marginalize diasporic individuals while simultaneously celebrating hybridity as a creative and transformative force. The recurring motifs of displacement and departure underscore an existential dimension of diaspora, situating Dharker's poetic voice in the liminal "third space" where new meanings and identities emerge. In addition, Dharker foregrounds gender as a crucial element in diasporic negotiations, presenting women as agents who resist and redefine their identities against patriarchal and cultural constraints. By situating Dharker within both postcolonial and Scottish literary traditions, this paper argues that *The Terrorist at My Table* contributes a distinct voice to global literature, challenging monolithic narratives and advocating for inclusivity, multiplicity, and empathy.

Keywords: *Hybridity, Diasporic identity, Politics of belonging, Postcolonial poetry, Terrorism and language, Cultural dislocation*

Introduction

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry collection *The Terrorist at My Table* occupies a unique space in contemporary postcolonial literature, intertwining personal narrative with global socio-political discourse. As a poet with roots in Pakistan, raised in Glasgow, and residing in London, Dharker embodies a diasporic consciousness that permeates her work. This paper examines select poems from the collection through the theoretical lenses of hybridity and diasporic identity, positioning Dharker as a distinct postcolonial Scottish poetic voice. By addressing socio-philosophical issues such as terrorism, gender politics, cultural dislocation, and existential fragmentation, Dharker's poetry reflects the complexities of a world shaped by colonial legacies and global modernity.

Hybridity and Diasporic Identity

Postcolonial theory provides critical tools to analyze Dharker's work, particularly the concepts of hybridity and diasporic identity as articulated by theorists like Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall. Bhabha's notion of hybridity describes the creation of new cultural forms through the interaction of colonizer and the colonized, emphasizing the "third space" where meanings are negotiated (Bhabha 55). Hall's ideas on cultural identity highlight the fluid, ever-evolving nature of diasporic selfhood, rejecting fixed notions of origin in favor of multiplicity and difference (Hall 402).

Dharker's poetry exemplifies these theories, as her work navigates the intersections of language, culture, and identity. The hybrid nature of her poetic voice emerges from her multilingual background and transnational experiences, while her exploration of diasporic identity reflects the emotional and intellectual negotiations inherent in living between worlds. In "The Right Word," Dharker interrogates the power of language in framing perceptions of terrorism and otherness. The poem oscillates between labels such as "terrorist," "freedom fighter," and "child," challenging the reader to question the constructed nature of identity.

The shifting terminology reflects Bhabha's concept of the "third space," where fixed meanings dissolve, and new interpretations emerge (Bhabha 57).

Dharker writes:

"Outside the door, lurking in the shadows, is a terrorist? Is that what you call him?" (Dharker 23)

The repetition of questioning destabilizes authoritative narratives, revealing how language can both define and distort reality. The figure outside the door is not static but fluid, embodying the hybrid identity that resists singular classification. This poem critiques the binary oppositions often employed in political rhetoric, urging a more nuanced understanding of identity in a globalized world. "They'll Say: 'She Must Be From Another Country'" explores the experience of cultural dislocation and the persistent sense of otherness faced by diasporic individuals. Dharker employs irony and satire to highlight societal prejudices and the absurdity of rigid national identities. "They'll say: 'She must be from another country.' When I speak on the phone and they ask me where I am from, I say I am from here, but they don't believe me" (Dharker 45). The speaker's assertion of belonging is met with disbelief, underscoring the racial and cultural markers that often override personal claims to identity.

This aligns with Stuart Hall's argument that identity is not rooted in a singular origin but constructed through ongoing cultural interactions (Hall 405). Dharker's poem critiques the exclusionary practices that define national identity in narrow terms, advocating instead for a recognition of cultural hybridity as intrinsic to modern societies. "The Habit of Departure" reflects on the perpetual state of transit inherent in diasporic existence. The poem evokes the emotional toll of constant movement, both physical and psychological:

In "I have the habit of departure, of always being on the brink of leaving for somewhere else." (Dharker 67), departure is not just a physical act but a metaphor for the existential condition of the diasporic subject. The "habit" signifies an internalization of displacement, a restlessness that becomes part of one's identity. Bhabha's hybridity theory is evident in the sense

that identity is formed not through rootedness but through the liminal spaces between cultures (Bhabha 60). Dharker captures the bittersweet reality of belonging everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Dharker's poetry transcends personal narrative to engage with broader socio-philosophical issues. Her work reflects anxieties surrounding globalization, terrorism, and the erosion of cultural boundaries. The poems discussed reveal how identity is shaped by political discourses, migration, and historical trauma.

In poems like "The Right Word," Dharker critiques the simplistic categorizations that dominate counter-terrorism narratives. She exposes how fear is manufactured through language, creating "us versus them" dichotomies that perpetuate violence and misunderstanding. Her poetry invites readers to confront their biases and consider the humanity behind the labels (Bhabha 63). Dharker illustrates how language becomes a tool for both inclusion and exclusion, often determining who is considered a threat and who is deemed innocent. The fluctuating identity of the figure outside the door in "The Right Word" symbolizes the ambiguity inherent in such categorizations. This reflection on the politics of fear resonates with the global post-9/11 landscape, where the discourse surrounding terrorism often simplifies complex geopolitical realities into reductive binaries. Moreover, Dharker's poetry suggests that the fear of the "other" is not an innate human response but a constructed narrative reinforced by media, political rhetoric, and historical prejudice. By dismantling these narratives, Dharker not only critiques institutional power structures but also challenges individuals to recognize their complicity in perpetuating fear-based ideologies.

Gender and Postcolonial Identity

Dharker also addresses the intersection of gender with postcolonial identity. Her portrayal of women often challenges traditional roles, presenting them as complex figures navigating patriarchal and cultural constraints. The exploration of female agency within diasporic contexts adds another layer to her critique of identity politics (Hall 410). In many of her poems, Dharker subverts stereotypical

representations of women, particularly those rooted in colonial and patriarchal frameworks.

She portrays women who resist, redefine, and reclaim their identities in spaces where they are often marginalized. This defiance is evident in poems where female voices assert autonomy against the expectations imposed by both their native and adopted cultures. The intersectionality in Dharker's work also explores how diasporic women grapple with the dual pressures of maintaining cultural traditions while navigating new socio-political landscapes. These tensions highlight the complexities of hybrid identities, where gender roles are negotiated within the broader context of migration, displacement, and cultural transformation. Furthermore, Dharker's poetry often interrogates the ways in which women are implicated in narratives of nationalism and religious identity. By foregrounding personal stories against the backdrop of political conflict, she exposes how women's bodies and identities become sites of ideological contestation. This critique aligns with postcolonial feminist thought, which emphasizes the need to understand gender within the intertwined frameworks of colonial history and contemporary globalization.

Existential Displacement

The recurring motif of departure in Dharker's poetry reflects a deeper existential inquiry. Her characters grapple with questions of purpose, belonging, and the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world. This philosophical dimension situates her work within a broader discourse on the human condition in the postcolonial era (Bhabha 66). Existential displacement in Dharker's work manifests as both physical migration and emotional dislocation. Her poems often feature protagonists who are metaphorical travelers, navigating not only geographical borders but also the psychological landscapes shaped by memory, loss, and identity crises. Departure becomes a recurring act—not merely leaving one place for another but continuously questioning one's place in the world. In poems such as "The Habit of Departure," Dharker explores how this constant state of flux leads to a fragmented sense of self. The act of leaving is

habitual, suggesting that displacement has become ingrained in the characters' identities. This existential restlessness reflects a postcolonial condition where the aftermath of colonialism leaves individuals suspended between histories, cultures, and homelands. Dharker's poetic voice thus resonates with a universal human experience of alienation, amplified by the specific historical and cultural contexts of diaspora.

Moreover, Dharker delves into how displacement can be both a source of suffering and a catalyst for self-discovery. The absence of a fixed home forces her characters to construct identities that are fluid, adaptable, and multifaceted. This philosophical exploration aligns with existentialist thought, particularly the works of thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who examined the human struggle to find meaning in an indifferent universe. Dharker extends this inquiry into the postcolonial realm, illustrating how historical dislocation complicates the existential quest.

Dharker as a Postcolonial Poetic Voice

While Dharker's work is globally resonant, her identification with Scottish literary traditions adds a distinct layer to her poetic voice. Scotland's own complex history of colonial entanglements and cultural hybridity provides a fertile ground for Dharker's explorations of identity. Her poetry can be seen as part of a broader Scottish postcolonial canon that includes voices grappling with issues of national identity, diaspora, and global interconnectedness (Hall 415).

Dharker's Scottish connection is not merely biographical but also thematic. The tension between belonging and alienation, central to Scottish literature, finds echoes in Dharker's exploration of diasporic identity. Her poems reflect the historical realities of Scotland's own colonial experiences and its role within the British Empire, drawing parallels with postcolonial struggles elsewhere. Furthermore, Dharker's use of English, infused with the rhythms and imagery of multiple cultural influences, challenges monolithic conceptions of Scottish literature. Her work exemplifies how postcolonial literature is not confined to former colonies but also emerges from within the colonial metropole, reflecting

the interconnected histories and identities shaped by empire (Bhabha 70). Through her poetry, Dharker contributes to a redefinition of Scottish identity that embraces diversity and acknowledges the country's complex colonial past. Her work stands alongside that of other contemporary Scottish writers who interrogate national identity, cultural hybridity, and the legacies of empire. In doing so, Dharker not only expands the boundaries of Scottish literature but also situates it within a global postcolonial discourse.

Conclusion

Imtiaz Dharker's *The Terrorist at My Table* is a powerful testament to the complexities of postcolonial identity in a globalized world. Through the lenses of hybridity and diasporic identity, her poetry reveals the fluid, contested nature of selfhood shaped by cultural intersections, political discourses, and historical legacies. As a distinct postcolonial Scottish poetic voice, Dharker challenges readers to reconsider their assumptions about belonging, otherness, and the socio-philosophical issues of our time. Her work not only reflects the lived realities of diasporic existence but also contributes to a richer, more inclusive understanding of contemporary literature.

Dharker's exploration of hybridity dismantles the rigid boundaries that have traditionally defined identity, presenting instead a dynamic interplay of cultures, languages, and histories. Her poems serve as a narrative space where the complexities of diasporic life are not only acknowledged but celebrated. This multidimensional portrayal of identity reflects the realities of our interconnected world, where cultural boundaries are increasingly porous, and identities are constantly in flux. Moreover, Dharker's critique of terrorism and the politics of fear underscores the power of language in shaping perceptions. By deconstructing the simplistic binaries often employed in political rhetoric, she reveals how such narratives can perpetuate misunderstanding and prejudice. Her work encourages readers to confront their biases, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of the human experience beyond the confines of cultural stereotypes. Her treatment of gender further enriches her postcolonial critique,

as she gives voice to women navigating the intersections of cultural expectation and personal agency. Dharker's female protagonists are not passive recipients of cultural narratives; they actively resist, redefine, and reclaim their identities within diasporic and postcolonial contexts. This emphasis on female agency adds a critical dimension to her exploration of identity politics, highlighting the intersectionality of gender, culture, and diaspora.

Dharker's position within Scottish literary traditions amplifies her unique voice in postcolonial discourse. By weaving together elements of Scottish history with her own diasporic experiences, she creates a poetic tapestry that reflects both local and global narratives. Her work challenges the monolithic conception of national identity, advocating instead for a more inclusive understanding that embraces diversity and hybridity. In conclusion, Imtiaz Dharker's *The Terrorist at My Table* is not merely a collection of poems but a profound exploration of identity, belonging, and resistance in the postcolonial world. Through her engagement with hybridity, diasporic identity, and socio-political critique, Dharker offers a compelling vision of contemporary existence—one that is fragmented yet interconnected, rooted yet fluid. Her poetry invites us to reflect on our own identities and the socio-cultural forces that shape them, making her work an essential contribution to the ongoing dialogue on postcolonialism and global literature.

References :

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Dharker, Imtiaz. *The Terrorist at My Table*. Penguin Books, 2006.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 402-416.