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Dr. Ambika Sharma
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Sri Guru Hari Singh College,
Sri Jiwan Nagar, Haryana,
India

Diasporic Otherness: Discursive Identity Conflict in Imtiaz Dharker's "Minority"

Dr. Ambika Sharma

Abstract

Diaspora literature is a genre of literature that emerges from the experiences of people who have been dispersed from their homeland. It often reflects the lives and perspectives of those who are living outside their native country and conveys a sense of longing for the homeland. The distinction between exile and diaspora, emphasizing that exiles typically aim to return to their homeland, while diaspora communities tend to establish themselves in their adopted countries whereas maintaining a connection to their ancestral land. Exile is a process of forced migration and a sparkling of the experience of departure from native land. This genre allows writers to explore their cultural heritage, identity, and the complexities of living in a new location while maintaining a distinct sense of identity. This paper delves into the themes prevalent in diaspora literature, specifically examining concepts of alienation, identity crisis, and multicultural identity as Imtiaz Dharker, an eminent South Asian diaspora poet, has conveyed through her poetry. It is examined through the analysis of her poem entitled "Minority" whether she embraces both a diasporic and transnational identity. The paper is an attempt to expound how Dharker's voice pinpoints home between countries, between borders, proudly exhibiting her adherence to "another country", one that refuses to be circumscribed by race, nationality or gender. Imtiaz Dharker, in her poetry, poses questions about her roots, the language and the significant parts of her past which can neither be burnt nor expelled to the soothing limbo of forgetfulness.

Keywords: Alienation, identity, diaspora, multicultural, nostalgia

Introduction

Migration in India is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by historical, political, economic factors, as well as personal motivations such as marriage and education opportunities. Within the realm of diaspora literature, several distinctive features emerge. These include the exploration of identity, the experience of uprooting and re-rooting in a new environment, the dichotomy of feeling like an insider and outsider, a persistent sense of nostalgia, and sometimes, a haunting sense of guilt (Nair). Diasporic literature, often associated with the 'theory of migrancy,' serves multiple purposes. It facilitates aesthetic evaluation, encourages the development of multicultural identities, and gives rise to new forms of hybridity (Chaudhuri). Furthermore, Indian diaspora literature plays a vital role in fostering global connections. It aids in the dissemination of information and offers perspectives on a wide range of issues. Through diasporic narratives, a bridge is built between individuals and communities, helping to overcome historical alienation and isolation while shedding light on past injustices and human rights abuses.

Imtiaz Dharker, an expatriate South Asian poet, defines herself as a Scottish, Calvinist Muslim, embodies a unique multicultural identity forged by her diverse life experiences. She was born in Lahore in 1954 to Pakistani parents, raised in Glasgow where her family moved when she was less than a year old, and currently moves between London, Wales and Mumbai. She draws from the cultural tapestry of three distinct homelands in her poetry (Srinivasan). Dharker, employs her verses as a medium to explore and decipher her identity, weaving subjectivity into her work. Her poetic oeuvre includes acclaimed anthologies such as "Purdah" (1989), "Postcards from God" (1997), "I Speak for The Devil" (2001), "The Terrorist at My Table" (2006), and "Leaving Fingerprints" (2009) and "Over the Moon" (2014). All these volumes have been illustrated by herself (Dharker, *Leaving Fingerprints*). She has won the Queen's Gold Medal for her poetry in 2014 and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Ambika Sharma
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Sri Guru Hari Singh College,
Sri Jiwan Nagar, Haryana,
India

She has been Poet in Residence at Cambridge University Library, for Threshold and has completed a series of poems based on the Archives of St Paul's Cathedral. The key themes of Dharker's poetry include issues of contemporary relevance – exile, home, freedom, journey, geographical and cultural displacement, communal conflict and politics of gender. Dharker is also a documentary film maker and has written and directed over a hundred films and audio-visuals. These documentaries center on education, health and shelter for women and children. She is also an accomplished artist and has had ten solo exhibitions of pen-and-ink drawings in India, London, New York, Hong Kong and France.

Imtiaz Dharker's one of the notable poems, "Minority," featured in the anthology "Postcards from God," delves deep into the multifaceted layers of the migrant experience. Through this poem, Dharker articulates the profound sense of being a foreigner, of never truly belonging anywhere (Dharker, *Postcards from God*). It is a poignant expression of her frustration at times when her multicultural identity renders her an outsider in her own right. Within the poem, the act of writing emerges as a powerful tool for self-definition, through which the speaker grapples with the complexities of her identity. This study elucidates two distinct yet interconnected experiences within the poem. Firstly, it explores the sensation of alienation resulting from the process of migration, highlighting the emotional and psychological impact of being displaced from one's homeland. Secondly, it delves into the transformative experience of constructing an identity through creative expression, specifically through the act of writing. The paper underlines the psychosocial dimension at play, emphasizing the state of disorientation and role confusion that often arises during the migration experience. This phenomenon, akin to what adolescents undergo due to conflicting internal and external pressures and expectations, engenders acute anxiety. Through a close analysis of "Minority," the poet seeks to shed light on the intricate interplay of these themes and their significance in diasporic literature.

Dharker's "Minority" delves into the intricate theme of identity, particularly highlighting the experience of feeling like an outsider or foreigner. The opening lines, "I was born a Foreigner. I carried on from there to become a foreigner everywhere," immediately challenge conventional notions of nativity and belonging. By stating that she was "born a Foreigner," the speaker disrupts the typical understanding that one's place of birth determines one's native identity. This unconventional declaration serves to provoke thought and question the very essence of what it means to be native or foreign. It suggests that the speaker's identity is rooted in a sense of foreignness from the outset, irrespective of her place of birth. The poem delves into the speaker's feelings of alienation, emphasizing that this sense of being a foreigner extends to every place she goes (Albansin). It conveys a deep frustration with the feeling of being an outcast, even within her own family or among her own people. This portrayal of alienation and the quest for identity forms a central theme in the poem, inviting readers to contemplate the complexities of identity in the context of diasporic experiences.

Through the second stanza of the poem "Minority," Imtiaz Dharker expresses her disappointments and feelings of exclusion regarding her identity. She conveys a sense of not having a specific, well-defined identity, which leads to her feeling disconnected from various places and groups of

people who possess admirable histories (Dharker, *Postcards from God I*).

"All kinds of places and groups
of people who have an admirable
history would, almost certainly,
distance themselves from me."

These lines highlight Dharker's sense of inadequacy and perceived alienation. She believes that she lacks the historical or cultural background that would make her an integral part of certain places or communities. This stanza defines the theme of identity crisis and the desire for a deeper connection to one's roots and history. The speaker's longing to understand and embrace her own identity is palpable in these lines, as she grapples with the notion of being an outsider or a minority in various contexts (Lakshmi).

Alienation is a pervasive theme in literature, representing the emotional and psychological disconnection or withdrawal of a person from something to which they were once attached. This theme of alienation is explored in various forms, including characters estranged from their true selves, their cultural heritage, or from society itself (Narayan). In the context of the poem "Minority," the theme of alienation is evident in the speaker's feelings of being a foreigner or outsider, both within her own family and in wider society. Dharker describes herself as being "born a Foreigner" and feeling like a foreigner everywhere she goes. This sense of alienation is reinforced by her perception that she lacks a specific and admirable history, which leads her to believe that places and groups with such histories would distance themselves from her. The poem highlights the alienating effects of not having a clear and rooted identity, as well as the impact of feeling like an outsider within one's own family. This sense of isolation and disconnection is a recurring theme in Dharker's work and is emblematic of the broader diasporic experience she explores in her poetry.

Through the following lines of the first stanza of the poem, Imtiaz Dharker uses vivid and symbolic imagery to convey the sense of alienation that she confronts within her own family (Dharker, *Postcards from God*).

"I went, even in the place
planted with my relatives,
six-foot tubers sprouting roots,
their fingers and faces pushing up
new shoots of maize and sugar cane."

The mention of "six-foot tubers sprouting roots" and "new shoots of maize and sugar cane" paints a picture of growth and renewal, but it also highlights the idea that her family members are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage and traditions, like plants firmly anchored in the soil. Dharker's use of this imagery suggests that her family members are connected to their cultural roots and are continuing to grow and thrive in those traditions (Gupta). In contrast, the speaker, as an outsider or alien, does not share this same connection and feels like she is not part of the same cultural growth and heritage. This stanza effectively conveys the theme of alienation within the family context, where the speaker feels like an outsider despite being related by blood. It reflects the complex emotions and experiences of

individuals who straddle multiple cultures and identities, a recurring leitmotif in Dharker's poetry.

The poet, in the third stanza of the poem, explores the theme of cultural alienation by using the metaphor of being a "badly translated poem" and comparing herself to a dish with strong and contrasting flavours (Dharker, *Postcards from God*).

"I don't fit,
like a clumsily-translated poem;
like food cooked in milk of coconut
where you expected ghee or cream.
the unexpected aftertaste
of cardamom or neem."

The line "I am a badly translated poem" suggests that the speaker feels like her cultural identity has been poorly conveyed or understood by others. It implies a sense of frustration at not being able to fully express herself or her cultural background in a way that others can easily grasp. This feeling of being misunderstood or misrepresented can contribute to a sense of cultural alienation. The comparison of herself to a dish with contrasting flavours like neem and cardamom in a milk-based dish highlights the idea of multiculturalism. In a multicultural society, different cultures, represented by the various flavours, coexist. However, the speaker's metaphor suggests that her cultural identity may not easily blend or harmonize with the dominant culture, symbolized by the milk-based dish. Instead, her presence may introduce unexpected and contrasting elements. These lines capture the complexities of navigating a multicultural society and the challenges of reconciling one's own cultural identity with the dominant culture, which can lead to feelings of alienation and difference.

In these lines of the poem "Minority", Dharker, uses the metaphor of food flavours to further explore the theme of cultural alienation and language. The choice of food-related metaphors continues with the reference to "food cooked in milk of coconut." This metaphor highlights the linguistic and cultural differences experienced by her. It suggests that her use of language and expression may be unexpected or unconventional in the context of her native culture, much like the taste of cardamom or neem in a dish where ghee or cream was expected. The reference to the "unexpected aftertaste of cardamom or neem" further reinforces the idea that the lyricist's presence and expression may introduce elements that are unfamiliar or different from what is typically encountered. This can contribute to a sense of alienation, especially in the realm of language and communication. This stanza highlights the challenges of linguistic and cultural identity that the lyricist faces, highlighting the feeling of being an outsider or minority in terms of language and expression.

The act of writing is a powerful means for individuals to explore and define their identity, especially in the context of diaspora and cultural alienation. Thus it becomes a way for Imtiaz to transcend these challenges and assert her own identity. She sees writing as a means to define herself on her own terms, rather than allowing external factors to dictate her identity. This transformation is symbolized in the following lines (Dharker, *Postcards from God*):

"It is there, I think, that the tongue
leaps at the wall, the mouth sings, the heart
quicken and the eyes fill up with water."

Imtiaz Dharker in the present poem reflects this transformative aspect of writing in the face of challenges related to identity, alienation, and multiculturalism. In the final stanza of the poem, the lyricist acknowledges the challenges she faces as an outsider or minority in various aspects of her life, including her own family, language, and culture. However, she also recognizes the potential for self-definition and empowerment through creative expression. Through the act of writing, she reclaims her voice and agency, turning her experiences of alienation and multiculturalism into a source of creative power. It's a testament to the transformative potential of art and self-expression, as well as a reflection of the poet's resilience in the face of challenges related to identity and belonging. Imtiaz Dharker indeed emphasizes the significance of writing as a means to examine and express the experiences of alienation and cultural differences in the fifth stanza of the poem (Dharker, *Postcards from God*).

"And so I scratch, scratch /
through the night, at this /
growing scab on black on white."

The lines vividly depict the act of writing as a process of introspection and self-exploration. The metaphor of scratching at a scab suggests that the act of writing is a way for the poet to confront and heal the wounds of alienation and otherness. The paper, as an impartial medium, provides a space where she can delve into her experiences without judgment. It becomes a canvas for her to probe the scars left by isolation, hostility, and the sense of being a minority. Her assertion that "Everyone has the right / to infiltrate a piece of paper" reinforces the idea that writing is a democratic and inclusive act. It's a way for individuals, regardless of their background or experiences, to share their stories and connect with others. In this sense, the poem invites readers to empathize with the Dharker's journey and, by extension, with the experiences of others who may feel like minorities or outsiders in various contexts. (Gale) This stanza accentuates the therapeutic and transformative power of writing, allowing the poet to engage with her own memories of estrangement while also forging a connection with her readers who may resonate with similar feelings of being a minority or outsider.

Imtiaz Dharker in the final stanza of the poem, emphasizes the transformative power of literature and the potential for readers to develop empathy and connection with the experiences of others. She defines:

"until, one day, you meet
the stranger sidling down your street,
realise you know the face
simplified to bone,
look into its outcast eyes
and recognise it as your own" (Dharker, *Postcards from God*).

The poet describes a process of transformation that occurs through reading and understanding. Initially, the reader is portrayed as an outsider ("stranger") until a pivotal moment

occurs. This moment is marked by an encounter with someone who has experienced the feelings of alienation and otherness that has been described in her poem. The phrase "sidling down your street" suggests a casual or unobtrusive encounter, highlighting the idea that these encounters can happen unexpectedly in everyday life. The writer conveys the idea that through reading and empathizing with the experiences of others (the writer's own experiences) readers can come to a profound realization. This realization involves recognizing the common humanity that underlies all individuals, regardless of their differences. The phrase "realise you know the face / simplified to bone" suggests that the reader sees beyond the superficial differences and external appearances to the essence of the individual. This realization is significant because it leads to a deeper understanding and connection. "Look into its outcast eyes / and recognise it as your own" reinforces the idea that the "stranger" or outsider is not truly foreign or separate but, in fact, reflects a shared human experience. The act of recognizing the stranger's eyes as one's own suggests a profound sense of empathy and solidarity.

Dharker employs powerful imagery to convey the impact of her writings on readers. "A page doesn't fight back. And, who knows, these lines may scratch their way into your head -" Here, she likens her written words to a page that doesn't resist or push back, emphasizing the idea that her writings are open and receptive to readers. The absence of resistance suggests that her words are not confrontational but rather an invitation for readers to engage with her perspective. The phrase "And, who knows, these lines" suggests an element of uncertainty and possibility. The metaphor "may scratch their way into your head" is particularly evocative. It paints a picture of her words as having a subtle, penetrating effect on the reader's consciousness. The act of scratching implies a gradual, persistent, and perhaps even involuntary process. In this context, scratching represents the gradual influence of her words on the reader's thoughts and perceptions. She acknowledges that her words may enter the reader's mind and subtly shape their thinking. This notion aligns with the idea that literature has the power to influence and broaden one's perspective, fostering empathy and understanding. The stanza concludes with an open-ended thought, suggesting that the impact of her words is not predetermined but depends on the reader's willingness to engage with and reflect upon them. It underlines the idea that literature can be a catalyst for personal growth and expanded awareness. It highlights the transformative potential of literature and invites readers to consider how words, like those of the poet, can gradually and subtly influence their thinking and understanding of complex issues such as identity and belonging.

Conclusion

Dharker's poem highlights the transformative and connective nature of literature, where readers can find common ground and shared humanity through the words of a writer. The idea that a writer's soul, experiences, and mind are reflected in his works, as expressed by Virginia Woolf, resonates strongly with the present poem. Through her creative expression, the poet not only articulates her own experiences as a migrant with a multicultural identity but also invites readers to join her in this exploration. In doing so, she creates a bridge between her own sense of identity

and the understanding and empathy of her readers. This poem affirms her belief in the power of literature to bridge gaps of understanding and to foster a sense of shared humanity. It suggests that through reading and empathizing with the experiences of others, readers can overcome feelings of alienation and recognize the common thread of humanity that binds us all together. It is a call for empathy and connection, highlighting the transformative potential of literature to create a sense of belonging and recognition in a diverse world. It underscores the significance of Dharker's act of writing as a means of self-discovery and self-definition. It illustrates how literature can transcend individual experiences and become a shared platform for exploring themes like alienation, identity, and multiculturalism. In other words, her poem encourages readers to recognize the humanity in others and, by extension, within themselves, fostering a deeper connection and understanding in a diverse and complex world.

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