

Transnational Inclinations and Migrant Subjectivities in Imtiaz Dharker's *Leaving Fingerprints*

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Abstract

The paper seeks to critically engage the poetry collection *Leaving Fingerprints* by Imtiaz Dharker, based on immigrant transnationalism, by theorizing that connection between source and destination is a significant aspect of migration and all forms of migration networks generate a sort of imagined space, which is usually organised amidst contrary notions of belonging. The paper thus aims to find and assess these principles, by using select poems from the collection as a backdrop, which come off as antithetical to Dharker's conceptualisation of transnationalism. It is also pertinent to observe that migrant subjectivity produces a pan geographic format of assimilation, spanning home and host societies, while also proclaiming to establish a transnational community. The issues thus raised are as follows. Does Dharker treat migration as a state of being absolutely rootless and belonging anywhere or does she foreground the constant movements as a liberating aspect of transnationalism? Does she presumably celebrate the life in-between or rather explores the dilemmas of migrants who are unable to claim either national or cultural identification? Does she actually foster the idea of cultural hybridity or encourages the reader to look for the possibility of an identity which conveniently goes beyond a specific community, thereby repudiating any form of attachment to physical boundaries?

Keywords: assimilation, integration, belonging, cultural hybridity, transnationalism, migrant subjectivity theory.

Intiaz Dharker, a poet, artist and filmmaker can be viewed through the lens of transnationalism due to the diverse cultural and geographical influences evident in her work. Born in Pakistan and raised in Scotland, Dharker's poetry reflects the intersections of multiple identities and the fluidity of borders. Her transnational perspective is reflected in the themes she explores constantly. She often delves into the complexities of belonging, displacement and the negotiation of identity across cultural boundaries. The poems resonate with the experiences of those who navigate the intricate landscapes of multiple homelands and engage with the challenges of straddling different cultural worlds. The exploration of cultural hybridity is a recurring theme in her poems and she captures the essence of living between cultures, celebrating the blending of traditions and the creation of new, hybrid identities. Moreover, she often engages with universal themes, transcending specific geographical contexts. Her verses touch on human experiences, societal issues and existential questions that resonate across borders. In doing so, she emphasizes the shared humanity that transcends national or cultural boundaries contributing to a transnational dialogue. As a transnational poet, Dharker also challenges fixed notions of identity and homeland inviting the readers to question conventional ideas of belonging and to appreciate the fluidity of identity in an interconnected world.

Transnationalism, while gaining prominence in recent decades, has historical roots that can be traced back to earlier periods of human interaction and movement. The concept emerged in response to the inadequacy of traditional theories to explain the globalised and a constantly evolving world. Its theoretical foundations draw from diverse disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, political science and cultural studies. Early sociological perspectives on migration, such as the work of Everett Lee in the 1960s laid the groundwork for transnational thinking. However, it was scholars like Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc in the late 20th century who pioneered the conceptualisation of transnationalism as a framework for understanding the lived experiences of individuals and communities across borders. Everett Lee's work on transnationalism is primarily associated with his article- "A Theory of Migration" published in 1966. In this article, Lee sought to move beyond simplistic economic explanations for migration by introducing a more nuanced

framework. He acknowledged that traditional economic theories, which focussed primarily on economic disparities as the main driver of migration were insufficient in capturing the dynamics of human mobility.

Lee proposed a more holistic approach, emphasizing the interplay of various factors in the migration decision-making process. Lee's theory revolves around the idea of "push-pull factors" (Lee) which became a cornerstone in migration studies. Push factors are conditions in the migrants' place of origin that encourage them to leave, while pull factors are conditions in the destination that attract them. This dual approach allowed Lee to analyse migration as a dynamic and multifaceted process influenced by a combination of factors.

Linda Basch, along with Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc also significantly contributed to the development of the transnational framework, particularly through their collaborative work- *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* published in 1994. The book argues that the traditional understanding of nation-states as territorially bounded entities is inadequate in explaining the complexities of contemporary social, economic and cultural processes. The deterritorialised perspective recognises that individuals and communities maintain multiple affiliations and identities.

In *Leaving Fingerprints*, Dharker creates an innovative and experimental poetic response to the biometric regime and migrant subjectivity, by focussing on a multitude of themes which become a communicative source of her idea of transnationalism. The migration crisis in Europe serves as a backdrop to the poems and focus on the integration challenges faced by the people which encompass cultural, social, economic and political dimensions. This paper aims to find out if assimilation beyond geographical boundaries can build harmony between host communities and migrants. It also seeks to understand how far can transnational initiatives promote actual community engagement and interaction.

Migrant subjectivity theory is a multidisciplinary framework that seeks to understand the nuanced experiences and identities of individuals undergoing migration. This theoretical outlook recognises that migration is not merely a physical

movement, but a complex process that significantly influences one's sense of self, belonging and agency. At its core, this theory explores the subjective dimensions of migration, examining how individuals' internal encounters and exposures shape their respective journeys. One key aspect of this theory is the verification that migrants bring diverse backgrounds, cultures and histories to the migration process. Their subjectivities, or the unique ways they perceive and interpret the world are deeply intertwined with their personal narratives. The movement across geographical boundaries contributes to a dynamic and evolving sense of self. Most of the times, the dislocated people go through a renegotiated and distinct form of individuality. Dharker, in the collection, *Leaving Fingerprints* suggests that for a person who lives across different time-zones, the sense of self is not fixed but rather dynamic and adaptable. Such a life can alter a person's identity over time due to experiences, relationships and personal growth.

Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, has made significant contributions to the theory of identity. One of his notable works is the book- *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. He emphasizes the importance of the "social imaginary" (Taylor) which refers to the shared cultural understandings and values that shape how individuals perceive themselves and their place in society. Dharker's theory of identity in a transnational framework refers to the same argument, which is against a narrow, individualistic view of identity. Taylor mentions that identity has a dialogical nature and that dialogue and interaction are crucial in shaping how people define themselves. Sarah Crown observes that Dharker is a "definitively diasporic writer (born in Pakistan, she grew up in Glasgow and now shuttles between Mumbai and London) (Crown 2009) Through the collection, *Leaving Fingerprints*, she comes off as a poet in exile, unsure of her place in the world, but at the same time, she tries to find her foundation. Madhurita Choudhury asserts:

"She explores difficult facets of a Muslim woman's identity and transcends the personal to voice the problems of a community. She aims at surpassing the ego-centric issues of rootedness, belongingness and marginalisation and essentialises all women through pain and suffering. In a way, she states that, not only the Third World Women but women of all creeds, countries and colours are united by repression and distress." (177)

In her 1997 poem, "Minority", Dharker expressed the concerns of being a foreigner in an unknown land and this situation is a defining quality of her poetry, not just a backdrop-

"I was born a foreigner

I carried on from there

To become a foreigner everywhere

I went..." (Dharker 1997)

In the poem, "The missing piece", she yearns for a space where a migrant (in this case, she) can fit perfectly. Her initiatives are obstructed by this abstract image of space, which configures like a puzzle and she visualises everyone who tries to assemble this puzzle and also the ones who created it-

"And there they are, for a moment,

the one who made the puzzle,

the one assembling it today,

the ones who are being assembled,

the instruments they are, the ones they play." (18-22)

As James Clifford mentions, "the term diaspora is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement." (Clifford 1994, 308) Dharker hints that the migrants' transition into a liberal multicultural society often involves a disordered framework of merging and acculturation and reclaiming connections can often come off as a puzzle and assume a radical foreignness. The poem explores the dilemmas of subjects who find it hard to therefore claim national or cultural identification with reference to the host country. Uma Majumdar mentions- "The pangs of loneliness caused by isolation are universally experienced by all immigrants but are far more acutely felt Asian woman." (Majumdar 47) The overpowering portrayal of the plight of South Asian woman in Dharker's poetry might seem a deliberate effort, but she still creates a suggestion and ambiguity through the images in her poems. They produce a tension, a contrast and a pull in

opposite directions, but such a pull is intensified by replacing and juxtaposing the experiences of a single individual by the voice of a collective community which accompanies and holds a share in the same individual's attempts to assimilate. We find that, for Dharker, belonging to a certain group or community does not necessarily mean that one identifies with it. One might still belong independently of one's identification within multiple communities. Dharker's images suggest that belongingness is earned by the constant flow within different categories and analysing emotional dimensions of the same.

The poem, "First gift" talks of belonging in the same sense, where the poet glorifies the spoons of experiences which she would hand down to her generations. These spoons shall commemorate the distinctions of her pan-geographic life which is beautifully distributed across countries like Turkey, Russia, Iceland, Macedonia, Peru and Fiji. The poem suggests an underlying readability and direct referentiality, where the meaning is transmitted in the way it intended to be. It refers to Dharker's own biographical trajectory, but aims to find the unifying element which would bind her upcoming generations into finding an immanent way of interpreting her life. The poem is not explicitly about the migrant subjectivity, but an attempt towards finding coherence and making sense of her own life-

"Of all the riches in the world
I would give you only this
no silver spoon, but only this,
a simple way to know their lips" (17-20)

Here, the functionality of her transnational inclinations reaches its peak, as she uses it as an apparatus of communication which can actively capture the fullness of the life she has lived across borders. Displacement is not questioned here and it is not manifested with its relation to questions of identity and recognition. It becomes an activity of choice and destiny, which is inherently celebrated.

In another poem, "Her footprint vanishes", the footprints become a testimony to the fact that the marks left by her unreadable and undecipherable in a world that though seems to grow closer through technology, but is collapsing when it comes to

interpersonal relationships. The spoons, which became the proofs of her presence in “The first gift” have now vanquished in the form of a footprint, which is incomprehensible and unfamiliar to anybody who witnesses it. The spoons shall tell a story, but the footprints won’t, thereby treating them as a sign of lives which are confined in transitory, vanishing moments, unable to find perpetual, everlasting selfhood and freedom-

“She disappeared without a trace,
they said. If there were footprints
on the sand, the sea got there
before anyone saw and wiped
her off the face of the earth.” (1-5)

In another poem, “The lost word”, the lines, “The price of passing/ The price of wearing/ this diminished word” (24-26) elaborate on the same idea of loss of authority and agency in a land inhabited by unknown people. The key figure here is the potential outcome after crossing the national confinements and entering into the metaphorical symbols of transnationalism. Rocio G. Davis in *The Transnationalism of American Culture* aligns transnationalism and hybridity within an intersectional rethinking about any obsession with the national in both creative and cultural practice. But, Dharker suggests, as the migrant dissolves his nationalistic identity, he also enters an insubstantial and questionable configuration of identity formation, which may or may not achieve the authenticity attributed to the previous one. While Dharker might be a capable advocate for transnationalism, she does not seem to get rid of the complex cluster of migrant significations which refuse to go away, throughout the process of assimilation. Often times, this might signal the loss of the most recognisable characteristic of a person- his voice. Dharker thereby implies that the codes of human transience will usually lead to different combinations of transnational and assimilative structures, wherein, the results will not truly be convincing and the disparities between the origin and host society will still be prominent.

In the poem, “Leaving Fingerprints”, she uses the symbol of fingerprints to respond to the modern methods of identification of migrants. As the poem constantly

deviates between landscape and fingerprint, we as readers witness the connectivity between source and destination being lost amidst a wide array of networks generated. Even as the migrant extends beyond loyalties which might lead to any specific place of origin or ethical or traditional group, the integration is still in question by the host society.

Dharker doesn't predominantly exaggerate like a multiculturalist does. She is certain of the fact that individuals migrate for different reasons, and for all of them, it is dubious to conceptualise the issues of assimilation with reference to a specific group or society. However, if one considers it dispensable, then such a categorisation must be premised on the respective demonstrations of the group they belong to. Other poems in *Leaving Fingerprints* like "Error", "Meanwhile, my letter box", "Keyboard", "Three ways", "*Gaddi aa gayi*", "Road-map" and "ID" all insist upon the dichotomy and dissociation, which gradually find place in a borderless world, where all probable discrepancies would coalesce into one. Dharker's guidance doesn't stop at how this coalition conjectures and takes form. She takes a step ahead and guides us through this strange space, which though is remarkable owing to the profound micro and macro narratives of transnationalism it offers; it can still throw us erratic assumptions defying the hopes foregrounded in persistent fluidity and adaptation. What she truly does is to expand upon the liminal hybridity of the migrant, thus making it a vantage point, from where she offers a critical view of such narratives. The speakers in her poems, having experienced racial and cultural discrimination evolve into individuals who meticulously interrogate the binaries of identity formation and move into the space where the self and the other are not distributed as two distinct entities, rather they conjoin into one. So, when the speaker in "*Gaddi aa gayi*" says,

"Gaddi aa gayi tation the
to the country with a different name
to the station on the other side
on another train." (40-44)

it hints that Dharker's personal strategies of selfhood defy the logic of rigid essentialism. It is in this sense that her poems also refer to the notion of

transnationalism, as described by Bill Ashcroft, who established the transnational as a sort of nomadic space which indeed can be associated with the cross border wandering of the speakers of Dharker's poems.

But, unlike Ashcroft's conception, she doesn't treat this space as a smooth one which demolishes the hierarchy of nation-states and institutions. Rather, she builds it as a space for potentiality where individuals are drawn together through a "spoon", "footprints", "teenbatti", "Keyboard", "letter box" and other such heterogeneous elements, collectively sketching a network of plural identities flowing together. Although, she asserts that this space still awaits an assessment regarding the multiple modes of subjugation that migrants witness, the biometric interrogations which follow them and the issues related to their integration into the host society. This article is only a step towards identifying these problems and the prospective reasons behind the same. To conclude however, it can be said that Dharker successfully questions the hypothetical sustenance of the domain of migrant communities which certainly deserves further critical exploration. She puts the familiar dialectics of belonging, unbelonging, assimilation and alienation into the broader concept of hybridity and articulates the need to revisit them through the lens of transnationalism and migrant subjectivity theory.

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