Wounds Inherited: Intergenerational Trauma in the Poetic Landscapes of Imtiaz Dharker

Ms. Meghna Singh Tanwar[1], Dr. Anjali Ramaria[2]
[1] *Research Scholar, School of Arts and Humanities, Career Point University, Kota*
[2] *Research Supervisor, School of Arts and Humanities, Career Point University, Kota*

***Abstract*—This paper examines the representation of intergenerational trauma in Imtiaz Dharker's poetry, particularly in her collection *The Terrorist at My Table*. It argues that her poetry serves as a form of historical witnessing, exploring how forced migration, exile, and cultural dislocation shape the identities and memories of subsequent generations. Rather than focusing solely on individual suffering, Dharker situates these experiences within broader gendered, cultural, and diasporic contexts, where memory is transmitted through everyday practices, silences, and inherited narratives. Fragmented poetic forms, evocative imagery, and disrupted temporal structures convey the difficulty of articulating histories that continue to influence those who did not directly experience them. The analysis draws on Cathy Caruth's theory of belated trauma, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's work on testimony. Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the Third Space further illuminate the negotiation of diasporic identities in the collection. The paper positions Dharker as an ethically engaged literary voice who transforms poetry into a space for preserving marginalised histories and challenging cultural silences. It ultimately demonstrates how her work connects inherited memory with questions of identity, belonging, and resistance in postcolonial contexts.**

***Index Terms*—Intergenerational Trauma, Imtiaz Dharker, Postmemory, Diasporic Identity, Postcolonial Memor**

I. INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational trauma in contemporary postcolonial poetry is not simply a private psychological problem or a fixed historical record. It forms as something cultural and narrative, built from quiet daily habits, domestic routines and the emotional landscapes people inherit. In this kind of poetry, large historical shocks forced displacement, and shifting borders, migration rarely appear as neat chronological stories. They leak into the present through gaps in rhythm, repeated images, broken snapshots and symbolic domestic spaces that point to experiences too large for ordinary language. These techniques give writers and their children a way to face historical violence that continues to shape their inner and outer lives long after the original events.

To understand how these wounds pass down, we need to look at the mechanics of intergenerational trauma: the transfer of emotional, psychological and sometimes physical effects from those who lived through violence to those who come after. People who never saw the original events still take them in through family gestures, unspoken grief and cultural practices. Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as marked by belatedness is a useful starting point. Trauma arrives with such force that the mind cannot register it fully at the time. It returns later in broken images and structural repetitions.

When this delayed pattern moves across generations, Caruth's clinical frame needs to open out to include family and cultural transmission. This is where Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory becomes important. Postmemory describes the connection that the next generation feels to the collective traumas of the past experiences they never lived through themselves, yet carry through stories, visual fragments, spatial cues and heavy silences in the family. It is not actual memory but an imaginative investment shaped by what Hirsch calls screen memories, household objects and the unspoken weight carried by elders. Children growing up among these dense emotional echoes treat them almost as their own.

In postcolonial writing, postmemory shows how the children of displaced people inherit an archive of loss

not mainly through textbooks but through the bodily habits, domestic routines and lingering anxieties of their parents.

This pattern of inherited postmemory appears with particular clarity in the life and work of Imtiaz Dharker. Born in Lahore, raised in Britain, and later dividing her time between Mumbai and London, she lives in a fluid cross-cultural space that resists single national identities. She does not treat trauma as a wound tied to one event such as Partition. Instead, her poetry presents trauma as a borderless, ongoing postcolonial condition. Her own movement across continents, languages and shifting ideas of home gives her writing a sharp sense that displacement is a continuing state rather than a finished chapter.

As a result, the speakers in her poems move through worlds where borders are not only lines on maps but psychological fractures running through kitchen tables, window frames and ordinary speech. Her work sits close to Homi Bhabha's notion of the third space a liminal zone where hybrid identities form through continuous negotiation rather than stable belonging. This in-between condition links directly to postmemory: living between nations means inheriting a fractured geography in which home feels both present and permanently out of reach.

In poems such as "Living Space," this becomes concrete in descriptions of cramped, fragile rooms that stand in for fractured, inherited identities. History settles into daily life. The trauma Dharker explores rarely explodes in grand spectacle. It lives in small moments a woman at a window, a child looking for solid ground, a mother performing domestic tasks in heavy silence. These scenes show postmemory working through ordinary objects and shared routines. This paper examines how Dharker's poetry articulates intergenerational trauma through broken form, symbolic domestic imagery and disrupted time. Bringing Caruth's trauma theory and Hirsch's postmemory into conversation with Bhabha's ideas of hybridity, it argues that her work is more than a record of ancestral suffering. It functions as an ethical archive of memory, resistance and recovery, turning earlier silences into living testimony for the present.

II. THE TERRORIST AT MY TABLE

To see how intergenerational trauma and postmemory move from theory into poetic practice, we need to look closely at the small geographies of Imtiaz Dharker's 2006 collection The Terrorist at My Table. In these poems, she deliberately collapses the distance between large scale political conflict and private household life. Political violence, terrorism and postcolonial displacement are not treated as distant events on battlefields or in camps. They constantly seep into private spaces. The home is never a pure sanctuary from history; it is the place where historical trauma is processed, kept alive and passed on.

This mixing of public and private is clearest in the title poem. Preparing a meal becomes heavily charged. The speaker stands in her kitchen chopping onions while news of destruction plays in the background: "At my back, the news is the same / as usual. A train / blown up, hostages taken." The steady rhythm of domestic work sits beside the steady recurrence of violence. The act of cutting food on a board echoes the fragmentation happening in the wider world: "I slice sentences to turn them into / onions. On this chopping board, they / seem more organised, as if with a little effort, / I could begin / I cut and chop." Language itself is broken down in the same way as the geopolitical landscape.

The book's title forces an uncomfortable confrontation with the figure of "the terrorist." It becomes a complex metaphor for the foreign, the displaced, or the inherited threat living inside domestic safety. In a time of postcolonial anxiety, the terrorist is no longer only an external enemy. It can stand for an internalized shadow the ancestral disruption carried across borders by migrants. Dharker writes:

Here is the food.
I put it on the table.
The tablecloth is fine cutwork,
sent from home.
Beneath it, Gaza.

The fine cutwork tablecloth resting over the geopolitical reality of Gaza captures something essential about postmemory. The heirloom cloth tries to cover or civilize the raw violence of history, yet the trauma presses up from underneath the furniture and haunts the ordinary act of sharing food. The table, usually a sign of family unity and safety, becomes a porous space where the foreign and the familiar mix.

Similar concerns appear in poems such as "The Property Structure" and "At the Lahore Karhai," where questions of ownership, displacement and inherited loss are mapped onto everyday architecture. Descendants of displaced families wrestle with a

phantom inheritance: properties, maps and borders redrawn before they were born that still shape their sense of belonging. The "terrorist" or "foreigner" can become an uncanny reflection of the self, mirroring the split consciousness of the migrant whose very presence is sometimes treated as a risk.

By grounding her critique in ordinary domestic objects the kitchen table, the chopping board, the embroidered cloth Dharker avoids abstract historical statements. For the generation that comes after, trauma plays out in the small, repeated actions of daily survival. The Terrorist at My Table shows how geopolitical violence enters the private mind and keeps the wounds of history seated at the centre of the home.

III. THE AESTHETICS OF SILENCE AND MULTIMODALITY

To understand how Dharker approaches intergenerational trauma, we need to look beyond the words alone and notice her architecture of silence, both linguistic and visual. In her books, text and image do not simply illustrate each other. They enter a tense relationship that mirrors the fractured consciousness of the postmemory generation. W.J.T. Mitchell's work on visual verbal media is helpful here. In books such as Picture Theory, he argues that the meeting of word and image is rarely smooth. It is often marked by resistance, gaps and interruption. Dharker uses this friction by placing her own stark monochrome ink drawings beside her poems.

These drawings are not straightforward illustrations. They function as non verbal gestures toward what cannot easily be spoken. In trauma studies, particularly through the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, extreme historical violence often exceeds the limits of ordinary language, leaving blank spaces where testimony falters. Dharker's line drawings inhabit those gaps. Sparse sketches of lonely windows, frayed threads, isolated room boundaries or broken figures act as an archive of the unspeakable. Images, as Mitchell notes, carry a kind of agency; they demand an ethical response that words alone may not force. In her work, the sketches operate as visual triggers that confront the blankness of historical loss. The white space around the minimalist lines points to the unrecorded silences of exile, the erased histories of those who crossed borders without leaving much of a paper trail. The multimodal page becomes a dual form of testimony in which visual and verbal silences reinforce each other and embody the broken nature of postmemory.

At the level of syntax, this aesthetic of disruption continues. Dharker's poems often resist smooth progression. Abrupt enjambments, jagged line breaks and sudden shifts in perspective mimic the psychological mechanism of dissociation the way the mind detaches from overwhelming experience and breaks it into disconnected fragments. Aggressive enjambments force the reader's eye and breath to stumble, mirroring the difficult retrieval of inherited memories. A sentence breaks mid thought across white space, matching the suspended state of the displaced descendant living between a lost past and an uncertain present. Her spare diction strips away ornament, leaving bare structures of speech. This linguistic economy reflects households shaped by trauma, where heavy silences and guarded words often replace open storytelling. Through visual verbal multimodality and dissociated grammar, Dharker turns the physical layout of the page into a kind of topographic map of inherited pain.

IV. GENDER, DOMESTICITY AND RESISTANCE

Intergenerational trauma in Dharker's poetry also works through the gendered body. In postcolonial and diasporic settings, the home and the female body are frequently cast as the primary guardians of cultural purity, national identity and tradition. Women's bodies become living archives on which national, patriarchal and postcolonial traumas are written. When large political conflicts Partition, border enforcement, forced migration shatter older structures of authority, the burden of maintaining cultural continuity and family honour often falls heavily on women. Dharker's poetry exposes this burden. Female subjects inherit not only geopolitical wounds but also the expectations of purity, modesty and obedience presented as timeless tradition.

In poems such as "Purdah," the veil and the enclosed domestic space function as tools of containment and silence. The veil is more than fabric; it is an institutional boundary that cuts the female body off from the public world and turns her into a vessel for ancestral legacy. Yet Dharker does not present her female speakers simply as helpless victims. She

reframes domesticity and feminine silence as sites of psychological resilience and quiet resistance.

There is an important difference between passive suffering and active domestic ritual. Small, repeated chores folding clothes, lighting a diya, keeping thresholds, sweeping, whispering prayers are lifted out of mere drudgery and treated as acts of agency. When historical violence strips a displaced family of land, status and stability, the micro rituals of the home become one of the few remaining ways to impose a measure of order. Through these daily acts, women engage in an embodied form of postmemory. Folding cloth sent from a lost homeland or cooking from inherited recipes becomes a somatic act of remembrance that resists historical erasure. Everyday habits, as much as written records, preserve and negotiate cultural memory. In Dharker's work, these routines quietly subvert oppressive structures from within. The female speaker uses the very spaces meant to confine her the kitchen, the courtyard, the window as platforms for endurance and silent rebellion.

In "Honour Killing", this subversion becomes more explicit. The speaker sheds rigid identities, clothing and behavioural scripts handed down through generations, treating the rejection as a radical act of self-definition. By dismantling inherited codes of honour and purity, the female subject interrupts the generational cycle of compliance. Dharker shows that while the gendered body is first colonised by history and tradition, it can also become the instrument of its own liberation, turning inherited wounds into a quiet, enduring strength that outlasts the borders drawn by nations.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Imtiaz Dharker's poetry offers a careful and layered exploration of intergenerational trauma. The past continues to inhabit the present across the cultural, emotional and psychological dimensions of diasporic life. Dharker appears not only as a poet of personal memory but as a historical witness and ethical voice confronting postcolonial displacement, gendered silences and inherited suffering. Her work addresses individual grief while engaging collective histories of migration, loss and cultural fracture, showing how trauma travels through families, bodies, language and everyday habits.

In a world marked by ongoing displacement, large-scale refugee movements, climate migration and the hardening of ethno nationalist politics, her poetry remains urgently relevant. As borders tighten and political language grows more hostile toward migrants, her work acts as a necessary corrective. It reminds us that borders are never only lines on distant maps; they run through kitchens, tables and psychological interiors. By tracing how historical violence moves across generations through the structures of postmemory, her poems speak to the experience of many people today who carry the invisible weight of lost homelands.

Ultimately, Dharker offers a way of living with inherited wounds that does not collapse into despair. By turning fragmented memories, domestic rituals and silent endurance into poetic testimony, her work shows that literature can do more than record pain. It can preserve cultural continuity, resist erasure and open paths toward survival, solidarity and recovery. Her contribution to postcolonial literature and trauma studies remains both contemporary and lasting.

REFERENCES

[1] Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. Routledge, 1994.
[2] Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
[3] Dharker, Imtiaz. The Terrorist at My Table. Penguin Books, 2006.
[4] ———. Postcards from God. Bloodaxe Books, 1997.
[5] ———. Purdah and Other Poems. Oxford University Press, 1997.
[6] ———. I Speak for the Devil. Penguin Books, 2001.
[7] Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History. Routledge, 1992.
[8] Hirsch, Marianne. The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust. Columbia University Press, 2012.
[9] Mitchell, W.J.T. Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation. University of Chicago Press, 1994.
[10] Said, Edward W. Orientalism. Pantheon Books, 1978.

[11] Simms, Patricia. Cultural Memory and Trauma in Literature. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.