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RESEARCH ARTICLE



IDENTITY FRAMEWORKS IN IMTIAZ DARKER'S *LEAVING FINGERPRINTS*

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ABSTRACT



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This paper examines Imtiaz Dharker's poetry collection *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009) through the lens of post-colonial identity theory. Drawing on Benedict Anderson, Verita Sriratana, and Beverly Daniel Tatum, it argues that Dharker frames identity not as fixed sameness but as a dynamic process of tracing, erasure, and reclamation. Through recurring motifs of fingerprints, footprints, clay, talismans, and landscapes, Dharker negotiates themes of diaspora, gender, memory, and faith. By reading poems such as "First Gift," "Seal," "Eye," "CCTV," and "Digging up the Bones," the paper demonstrates how Dharker transforms personal and cultural traces into evidence of existence, ultimately suggesting that identity is constituted through connection rather than isolation.

Keywords: *Imtiaz Dharker, Post-colonialism, Identity, Diaspora, Sufism, Leaving Fingerprints.*

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This paper explores a central tenet of post-colonial theory: the complex search for identity within Imtiaz Dharker's poetry collection, *Leaving Fingerprints*. Fundamentally, identity denotes an individual's self-definition and remains a paramount issue across contemporary literature. Etymologically derived from the Latin root *idem*, meaning "same," identity traditionally implies a sense of continuity or absolute sameness. Building on this framework of preservation, political scientist and sociologist Benedict Anderson posits that photography serves as a critical documentary device, allowing human beings to assert and communicate their permanent selfhood to others visually.¹ (Sriratana:2008)¹ However, as literary scholar Verita Sriratana (2008) argues, identity can conversely signify "difference." He notes that individuals are highly likely to define themselves through a relational process of "othering"—demarcating who they are by contrasting themselves against what they are not. This internal negotiation aligns with Beverly Daniel Tatum's (2000) assertion that 'identity functions as a dynamic state of mind; by consciously acknowledging their unique traits within a social matrix, individuals ultimately discover their authentic selves.'² Within diasporic literature, this search for identity acts as a vital healing process as characters come to terms with who they are or whom they wish to become, mirroring classic archetypal quests like that of Oedipus. Ultimately, Dharker uses this framework to illuminate the specific struggles of women writers who must navigate and dismantle the systemic obstacles society places along their path toward self-realization.

Imtiaz Dharker, Pak-Indo-Brit poet, is an accomplished artist and documentary filmmaker. Her collections of verse include *Purdah* (1989), *Postcards from God* (1994), *I Speak for the Devil* (2003), *The Terrorist at my Table* (2007), *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009), *Over the Moon* (2014), *Luck is the Hook* (2018), and *Shadow Reader* (2024). Her themes are geographical and cultural displacement, gender politics, home, and the interrogation of faith and freedom. In *Leaving Fingersprints*, "the poet combines permanence and impermanence and the preciousness of the moment with a strong sense of the presence in that moment of ancestral shadows. As a restless wanderer, she travels through the external landscapes of town and country, as well as the internal territories of the mind and body. She expresses the idea of oneness with the universe. She talks about identity and the permanence of lived objects in the form of fingerprints and artifacts, and the loss and reclamation of landscape, things, and human life as history. The collection contains 96 poems on various themes such as nature, human relations, fingerprints as memory and culture, religious faith, talisman, different aspects of life and death, marriage, separation, dislocation, and identity. She talks about fingerprints as memory and culture in poems like "First Gift", "Seal", and "Contract". She talks about the culture and heritage of that landscape, handed down to generations as a token of well-being for future generations. In "First Gift," she talks about different cultures that handed down objects as a part of inheritance. She mentions the names 'a coral spoon from Turkey, A well-used wooden spoon from Russia, a spoon discovered in Iceland, a shell spoon from Macedonia, a dipper from Peru, from Fiji' to enlighten the permanence of



things. She says: Of all the riches in the world / I would give you only this/ no silver spoon. However, only this/a simple way to know their lips/ to touch the hands/ that handed down/ the hand-me-down (P. 13). The sentiment that handed down the 'spoon' is the real worth of the heart, but not the materialistic worth of the object.

In "Seal," she discusses the images on the clay pot and how they usher the viewer into their world with a touch, prompting one to travel through different places and cultures. Though there is a lapse of time, it can be filled with mere touch. She feels:

..... My thumb upon, your clay/ my spirals and yours /may be mismatched, but when/I touch the evidence that you/have been, I feel my own/ warm blood pump into your long-dead heart (P. 14).

When she touches the clay that her father once touched, she feels as if she has touched her father. The mere touch brings life into the dead. The 'fingerprint' is a memory here, meant to keep the poet's heart happy. So here this sort of identity is in a familiar dynamic. Here, the fingerprint symbolises 'permanence, immutability, above all of ownership – to a woman in exile, unsure of her place in the world' (Review by Sarah Crown in *The Guardian*: 2009). Clay symbolises earth and by touching the clay she feels as if she touches her father. Thus, clay becomes the root of her identity.

In the title poem "Leaving fingerprints," the poet imagines the fingerprint as a landscape and a landscape as a fingerprint- both are mixed. 'The poet's fingerprints hardly belong to her and transfer into a world of complex loss and retrieval as things

lose and regain their names. Dharker's belief in Sufism makes her attain 'a sense of spiritual fulfillment that comes from a sense of unity with the internal and the external; with the self and other people; with emotions that seem to conflict; and with everything else'. Unity is one of the main goals in Sufism. Hazrat Inayat Khan says:

"The goal of the Sufi movement is to work toward unity... its main object is to bring humanity, divided into so many different sections, closer together into a deeper understanding of life. It is to work together to bring the world that natural religion which has always been the religion of humanity: to respect one another's belief, scripture and teacher."³

Dharker expresses this togetherness with nature: I know this frosted landscape/better than it knows itself, its layers/ a busy clock of history, still ticking. /Under my feet I feel the trail of the slug, / the snail, the earth's deep squirm around an anklet or an amulet, / a broken cup. (Leaving Fingerprints, P. 49)

Like fingerprints, Dharker's landscapes are also capable of yielding clues to ancestry. The soil beneath the feet conceals an anklet or an amulet, a broken cup. All these natural and materialistic things will lose their identity, as they are dead and gone. They will lose their names but regain identity in another form and shape. So the existence has left a trace. The poet says: Written and rewritten in the calligraphy/ of roots. The worm's heave/ and turn delivers messages up, / scribbled in folds of soil and



mud, afterthoughts/ that grow to trees, trunks with arms, / branches with fingers, twigs with nails, / scratches on air, / tear after tear on a white page. (Ibid)

Sarah Crown opines in her review on the collection that 'Things transform into fragments of their former selves and there is a shedding also of the load attached to proper names for a more nimble alternative. Everything is connected in this universe; fingerprints to landscape and landscape to fingerprints.' (The Guardian: 2009). Dharker writes: These names have given their artifacts away/ to be sparse as winter. / Here I am, they say. Here and here for you to see/ fingerprinted on the sky. (Ibid) This is the actuality of life understood in the course of self-cognition. One cannot understand the reality within while studying the outer world of the self. The prophet said, 'Whatever you distinguish by your illusion and imagination, even with the best of your logic, is your own creation, rejected and returned to you' ⁴ (Seyyedeh Dr. Nahid Angha, *The Forgotten Realm of Destiny*:2012)

Evidence is the proof of existence. Both fingerprints and footprints will be considered proof at the scene of an accident or mishap. Dharker exemplifies this in the poems "Talisman", "CCT.V", and "Her Footprints Vanishes". In these poems, the poet talks of footprints as evidence that someone has visited that place. In the case of an accident, or when personality evidence is missing, footprints are traced to find the whereabouts of the persona. The protagonist envisions an imaginary threat. She tries to seek a helping hand but fails. In "CCTV," she says there is proof of her existence in her footprints. It is feasible because of technology. Her footprints are

erased by time and tide, and her existence is forgotten. In "Her Footprints Vanishes", the poet says: She left her fame like a paper flag/ you wave for a minute and toss, away. / No one remembered. (p.23)

Dharker says that fame is ephemeral. It is short-lived. Change takes place little by little. But the missing personality, 's/he returns not in the original state but as 'grain of sand, grain of star'. She is only a particle in the great multitude. Her individual identity in another form definitely exists. Her footprints vanish but merge with the ecological footprint, which is an analysis that compares human demand on nature with the biosphere's ability to regenerate resources and provide services. Ecological footprint analysis is now widely used around the globe as an indicator of environmental sustainability. Dharker uses the symbol 'footprint' to indicate 'an individual's mark on things'. Though the print is erased, values remain.

In the poem "Digging up the bones," the poet talks about Afghanistan, where the Master, Hakim Sanai, lived during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and is regarded as the earliest Afghan teacher to use the love-motive in Sufism. Maulana Jalal-ud-din Rumi (born in Balkh, Afghanistan) acknowledged him as one of his inspirations. It was a land of valuable heritage, but it has now lapsed into oblivion because of political unrest, religious fundamentalism, and Talibanism. It is the land where forbearance and universality of all religions are taught, but now those thoughts are obliterated. Dharker inscribes: The mud in this country /has a long memory. / It holds bones in its mind/ for a century/ and is reluctant to give them up. (p.38) The



'bones' refer to the mortal existence of values and culture since time immemorial. With changing times, values change, but basic cultural attributes stay. Each culture has its own distinct quality. So also Afghanistan, which stood for generosity, has changed, and in that place, coldness, fear, anxiety, and distress exist now. Now the past is only a trespass on the sentiment. Despite these drastic changes in its culture and sentiments, the old values remain, and history remembers the facts.

In other poems like "Cut-out", "Scene", "Somewhere else", "Somewhere else again", and "Scene again", Dharker talks about fingerprints and her presence in many places along her journey. In "Scene," she is a suspect. 'They are looking at me/as if they can already see/that the prints are mine'. At the scene of the crime, forensic evidence identifies the fingerprints and implicates the speaker. In "Somewhere else," the speaker's status in motion is elaborated. She says that they cannot suspect her because 'I am always somewhere else!' She declares her migrant status: Ask anyone. I am always somewhere else. / I was not there when they dug / out the nail and found the cross..... I was not there when they celebrated, (P- 98). It is also with a photograph. She says that 'for a true image, a single frame/will not be enough. There are some limitations to the proof of fingerprints. It will not say about the sex, race, or nationality of a person. The poet writes: All it can say/ with any certainty is/that you were here and touched this thing (I'm sorry to say, P.102).

In "The Temporary Face," the poet talks about detained memories and moments that new relationships will erase. Life captures the fresh ones,

and the old ones fade with time. She says: I learn to/love the thing that has to be erased, /the thing I may not be allowed to keep, /sand that runs away beneath my running feet (P. 107). The speaker/poet confesses that she loves fleeting things but not the permanent ones because they cause more pain than the transient ones. Life is also not eternal. Meeting and parting take place. She says: The wind swept us in through one door/and is pushing at the other. /Outside, it is waiting for us, running/impatient fingers through the trees/waiting to take our hearts, browse through them/and toss them to the earth like finished leaves. ("The room with two doors", p. 109)

Beverly Daniel Tatum, in his article "The Complexity of Identity: 'Who Am I?'," observes that identity is a complex, intersectional construct where racial experience is continually shaped by factors such as gender, age, economic status, sexual orientation, and ability. Drawing on Cooley's "looking-glass self," the text (*Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*: 2000) argues that individual identity is filtered through multiple, intersecting social dimensions rather than a single label. Further, Dharker identifies herself with her faith in Culture and Religion in the poems discussed now. The form of trinkets is discussed in the poems "Talisman," "Hand of Fatima, Hand of Miriam," and "Eye." The poet gives information about the trinkets or amulets that possess supernatural or magical powers. A 'talisman' could be a 'sentimental object' or 'souvenir' of some kind that, when looked at years later, evokes a certain emotional response. For ages, it has been believed that these trinkets are powerful talismans against the evil eye. The belief in them is so



strong that they have entered into the culture, leaving their trails for posterity. Sentiment and culture have left their fingerprints in the form of Talisman. In the poem "Talisman," the poet imagines an anonymous person.

The 'talisman' stands as a symbol of 'protection' and survival, which can help when all the familiar modes of security fail. With this hope, to keep oneself psychologically secure and content, the talisman is worn. In "Hand of Fatima, Hand of Miriam," the poet discusses the origins of Islam and Christianity, which are similar and emerged from the same skies. In both these religions, a trinket carrying the symbol of a hand with an eye in the middle is used. This hand is called the 'hand of Fatima' by the Muslims and the hand of Miriam' by the Christians. Though the religions differ, the beliefs and culture surrounding talismans are the same. Dharker hints at the universality of faith through the symbol of the 'talisman'. Dharker prays: where tin becomes a talisman. /Fatima or Miriam, Miriam or Fatima/protect us all from harm. (Hand of Fathima, Hand of Miriam, P. 17). She has faith in the devoutness of both Fatima and Miriam. She ends the poem with a prayer seeking protection of humanity from harm, irrespective of religion or faith.

In "Eye," Mother Earth claims her subsistence even before the establishment of any faith or any existence. She claims to have existed before the notions of the hands of Fatima and Miriam. She tells about various labels and incarnations attached to her.

She says: I was worshipped before those two
were even born and I was no one's lover.

What I know about evil spells
would make the Devil shiver. That hand
is mine, shelter against bad magic and
malevolent.

Whenever you see it, you will notice the third
image
, which shifts as time does, changes shape
to be the generous eye, the all-seeing vulva.
("Eye" P. 19)

She confirms that she is the mother of this universe, and she acknowledges: I was the one who ate the sand storms, / drank the floods and swallowed earthquakes, /the name they lost, goddess, bitch, / the whole world's mother. (p.19) Dharker opines that languages that enunciate the name and nature of Mother Earth may differ, ultimately, the preserver, the nature survives.

The chief ideal of Sufism is to attain perfection through unity with God through 'Self-effacement', which refers to the ending of the 'false self'. God is sought 'in the heart of humanity'. It is sought by acknowledging the divine in everyone and everything. The symbol 'Winter' in the poem suggests a soul separated from God. Though the soul is separated and becomes a mystery, the existence is identified. Rumi describes the process of evolution through incarnation:

I died as a mineral and became a plant,
I died as a plant and rose to an animal,
I died as an animal, and I was a man.

Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar



with angels bless'd; but even from angelhood

I must pass on: all except God doth perish.

(Rumi - Wiki quote en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Rumi)

For Rumi, religion was mostly a personal experience and not limited to logical arguments or perceptions of the senses. For Dharker, religion is also a personal faith; she believes not in a particular God but in a universal God. Her religion is love towards humanity. Her perception of life is to live and let live all the other living things of the universe. Sufis believe that it is an illusion to see human beings as different or separate from nature and the universe. The life source in all living things is one. All these living beings have the right to live on this earth. There is no superior status given to man.

In this collection, a series of poems is set on 'the south coast of England around history-steeped Hastings, in which images crisp up and colours deepen in terrain that has acquired stability from the stamp of the past'. Dharker's perceptions on life and existence are found in the poems "How it started", "Hastings", "The Game", "One Frame", "Seed-box", "Rush", and "Cup". In her travels, Dharker visits the 'Hastings Museum', where she finds shells that showcase life in "How it Started". The shell contains:

....the sounds of being born and dying/ eating,
drinking/ celebrating, praying,

war-dreams beating/ anklets singing/ all of life
like shells/ still trailing sand. /

Collected in your busy hands. (P. 24)

The reality of life and experiences are all brought back as a representation of life. Though life vanishes, icons remain, speaking of life. It is not unique; it still

reminds us of its once-upon-a-time existence. She notes down the historical facts about Hastings, the wars, and the colonial past with a school consciousness, but the truths are not pursued. The reality is captured in a notebook. She says in the poem "Hastings" that she carried the facts home:

....to a place where no eraser / could rub out the
wrong and the battles moved/

with all of us, red tick, red tick, red tick, /however
far we ran. (P. 26)

Whatever happened might not be changed. Acceptance of reality keeps one happy. In "24 frames," "Life Capture," "The Game," and "One frame," the poet gives a visual picture of different aspects of life captured in photos and frames. *

*Dharker, as a filmmaker, believes that photography itself produces what painting does, except that the method of creation for the two media is different. She also thinks that literature is an expression of individual thought and feeling achieved through the creative process. Generally, artists seek to share their experiences, observations, and understanding (their "truths") through the medium that best suits their personal skills and abilities. Whether artists are writing stories, painting pictures, composing music, creating a photograph, or making a film, they are expressing their relationship to the world around them at that moment. Their works share certain expressive elements, such as structure, theme, and tone. Dharker, both a poet and an artist, shares her observations and experiences brilliantly through her poetry and drawings. Through her sketches, Dharker represents the freezing state of life and identity. In a photo frame, the river remains a



river when the shot is taken. However, in reality, it changes. So, life in the frame is frozen, but in genuineness, it moves on, changing its shape and destinations.

In "One Frame," the poet talks about capturing life in one shot, framed and boxed. However, beyond the frame, there is so much, but the frame has no expression. What happened to the soldier in the frame is revealed in the poem "What is in the box." The poet pictures a battle scene - Soldiers fighting in distant lands and a view of trucks moving. This phenomenon continues as long as there is an urge to capture lands. The life that the trucks carry refers to soldiers, who sacrifice their lives for a cause. The poet gives a visual image of war:

The click, the blast, the cloth

flapping in the wind, tanks rolling pass. (P. 34)

The soldiers are dead, and their personal belongings, a wallet, a picture, a badge, and an address, are sent. They speak volumes to their families. The poet metaphorically says, 'They forgot to put in his Voice'. Thus, the small reminiscence indicates massive silence. In "Seed box", the poet talks about the natural process of blooming and propagation that happens. She watches the poppy seeds get ready to be planted, and, all of a sudden, the lifeless seeds sprout into life. The idea continues in the poem "Rush." Life gushes forth from the destruction of trees, burning, and ground prepared for seed. The poet describes the life force flowing in different images:

The sap called up
from root to pod follows
the rush from the vein

to your God. Find
the grand artery, make
a new road, open the route
for the gush and flood,
the water, the oil, the saline
the blood,
the string of a lute, a kite,
the flight of a bird.

.....

Feel it? Thus rush in the blood.

This bloom in the vein. (P. 40-41)

She finds life's source in seeds, sap, a string of a lute, a kite, and the flight of a bird. Whatever the shape and color of the exterior, the face that works within is the same. Thus, the poet identifies herself with all the living sources of the universe. So she believes that identity should be viewed more broadly rather than as belonging to a particular nation, family, or religion.

According to Beverly Tatum, "Integrating one's past, present and future into a cohesive, unified sense of self is a complex task that begins in adolescence and continues for a lifetime.... The reliance on particular aspects of our identity varies at different moments in our lives. The process of integrating the component parts of our self-definition is indeed a lifelong journey.

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