

Feminism in the Poem "A Century Later" by Imtiaz Dharker: A Deconstructive Analysis



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Abstract: *This paper analyzes Imtiaz Dharker's poem 'A Century Later' using the critical perspective of deconstruction. Through a qualitative method, the poem's dissemination and flickering of meaning are deconstructed to derive a new sense in the context of feminism. The paper explains deconstruction as a critical theory of language and examines how it explores verbal contradictions, shifts, and implicit references in the poem to reveal the uncertainty of literary meaning and language. 'A Century Later', when studied from a Deconstructive standpoint, reveals nothing stable and unified and proves that there is no single particular meaning in the text. Visual imagery is used to unravel the struggles of women persecuted worldwide and how their perseverance drives freedom. Deconstructive analysis of this text informs us that a woman cannot be separated from her liberty and educational right. The poem illustrates the implied discourse of how dominating factors have regularized conventional beliefs in our culture and elucidates women's struggle against male superiority. Through profound analysis of the text, it is concluded that women's ability cannot be suppressed to stand against the despicable social system.*

Key Words: Deconstruction, Patriarchy, Oppressed, Freedom, Women's Education, Feminism

Introduction

Imtiaz Dharker's poem 'A Century Later' was written hundred years later after the commencement of the First World War as an amazing response to Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. This poem is about the difficulties and struggles of women who are oppressed around the world. Their right to education is ceased. They are forced to fight the battle, emphasizing society's cruelty and wickedness. The goal of school girls is to become ordinary, which means they want to be treated equally. However, due to the oppressive rules of government and society and due to the war, the young girls have to give up their ambitions to survive in society. The poet expresses the girls' desire to have the freedom to gain education just like their male counterparts. Males have dominated women in the field of education. School is considered no less than a battlefield for women in a patriarchal society. Pursuing education is like a war for women in many parts of the world. The poem's context also

alludes to the incident of Malala Yousufzai, whom the Taliban shot on her way to school. Dharker highlights the conservative mindset of our society to deprive women of their basic right to education. Women's education is shown to have the least consideration in society because society cannot see women progress. Men are represented as oppressors who control education.

Women are prey to confinement and domination. This poem shows how women compete with this gender discrimination in society. Dharker suggests that bullets and war cannot diminish the strength that a woman has. If women have inner zeal and zest, they can challenge violence through their courage and determination. The poet beautifully conveys to conservative minds that you cannot destroy the sources of women's liberty. Despite societal patriarchy, a woman is inseparable from her freedom and right to education. Women are symbolized as soldiers who are supposed to win. If

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they have strong willpower, they can ruin masculine efforts, which are barriers to ultimate emancipation.

Imtiaz Dharker attempts to explain social problems by contextualizing her living experience in the subcontinent. Her poetry encompasses her profound cultural experience and social diseases associated with the cultures. Her works describe the plight of women and their subaltern ranks in society. Dharker has optimistic views about women's empowerment, and her poetry attempts to create women's identities. She uses her art and poetry as a device to expose all women who are bound to house and hearth and are subject to constant physical and mental abuse and agony by the male hegemonic impact (Bali, 2015). In this poem, Dharker emphasizes women's issues, exploitation, conformity to norms and passivity.

In 'A Century Later' poem, Dharker uses the poetic devices of allusion, symbolism, diction and heavy imagery to explore how determination drives liberty. This poem can be read at different times and in different situations. According to Derrida, Deconstruction tries to defer the meaning of the text. Deconstruction helps the researchers develop new and implied meanings of the text. We can analyze any type of text through this theory by reconstructing its meaning. The poem 'A Century Later' is chosen for deconstructive analysis. The reason is that the text has too many contradictory meanings in it. We can construct new meanings of this poem by reading it repeatedly. The vocabulary used in the poem helps give insight into new meanings. Every time we critically analyze the text of the poem, we come across new and different aspects of the poem. We can derive several new conclusions from the text. The possibility of deconstruction lies within the context of a literary text, and it is not something to be applied from the outside. Therefore, the deconstruction theory is fit to explore the implicit meanings in the text. Deconstruction helps to pursue the meaning of the text to reveal contradictions and internal oppositions on which the text is built. Patterns in the respective poem reflect the Deconstruction theory. The text of the poem has similarities with this particular theory. The meaning of the poem's text is unstable, and it can be critically analyzed through deconstruction.

The poem is viewed from the Feminist perspective. The second wave of Feminism took place in the 1960s and 1970s and significantly impacted girls' education. Feminists argue that girls are not given the

same opportunity to seek education as boys, and this inequality prevents girls from achieving their full potential. This wave challenged traditional gender roles in education. It emphasized that girls should be free to pursue any area of study they are interested in. The efforts of Feminists helped to lay the foundation for many educational opportunities available to girls today. As the poem 'A Century Later' is about the sufferings and pains that young girls endure on the road to education, it fits perfectly in the frame of Feminism.

Objectives of the Study

- To reveal the complex functioning of the ideologies on which the text is established.
- To explore the poem at the verbal, textual, and linguistic stages through a close reading of the text.
- To explore the poem in the light of the second wave of Feminism.

Research Questions

- What is the complex functioning of the ideologies in the text?
- How can the poem be explored at the verbal, textual and linguistic stages?
- How does the poem reflect the second wave of Feminism?

Literature Review

Deconstruction is a complex and technical phenomenon. Deconstruction first began in the United States as a technique to interpret literary texts. (Derrida, 1967) gave the concept of deconstruction in his book *Of Grammatology*, where he explored the interplay between the construction of meaning and language. Deconstruction is an effective practice in revealing the hidden and implied meanings and perceptions in texts, and it is, in fact, a style of interpretation that sometimes leads to finding unexpected meanings (Yegen, 2014). According to Derrida, Deconstruction is not a method but a reading activity of literary texts. He believed that the meaning of a literary text is not consistent and flexible. Meaning is an effect produced by the interrelationship among the terms in the language. For (Barthes, 1989), the meaning of the text is shaped by another text. Once a work has been written, its existence becomes independent of the author's hegemony. Derrida

believed that in Western culture, people express their thoughts through binary oppositions. Each term in binary opposition affects the other—deconstruction aimed to erase the boundary between binary oppositions. Derrida's opinion of deconstruction is in dismantling conceptual opposition, the overthrowing of hierarchical systems of thought, which can then be re-inscribed within a different order to create something new (P. Hendricks, 2016). The literary text has many differences at different levels, such as structural, semantic, phonological and syntactic. When we see through the lens of deconstruction, we find that the words have different values and meanings within the same line, which are derived by their comparison with other words (Haider, 2022). Based on deconstructive arguments, the researchers believed that due to the disunity of the text, the final meaning of the text could not be recognized and marked. In doing Deconstructive reading of a literary text, it is revealed that the meaning of a text expands endlessly. (Barthes, 1968) claimed in "From Work to Text."

"The text is plural as it accomplishes the plurality of meaning: an irreducible plural. The text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, and thus it answers not to an interpretation alone but also to an explosion and dissemination."

The chosen poem, "A Century Later", is written by Imtiaz Dharker. She is a well-known British Pakistani poet and artist who has published five poetry books. Her poetry mainly discussed the theme of the suppression of women by culture, society, and religion. Her poetry captures the heart of women. She presents the sufferings of women not only in Islam but throughout the world with a deeper sense of consciousness (Nabi, 2013). She is one of the feminist women poets who raised her voice against the male-dominated and hostile society. In her poetry, Dharker shows immense interest in women's health, education and the condition in their society. Through her poetry, she aims to uplift those who still suffer. A woman is dependent on her husband and then on her sons through different stages in her life due to the conservative attitude towards women's education (Begum, 2018). The poem 'A Century Later' throws light on the rise of women, where a woman smashes social philosophies related to their educational rights (Khan, 2021). Inequality of women prevailed because men exercised power and authority (Lesley Day, 1992). Moreover, Dharker represents a woman's agony and continual labour to rise against oppression

in her work. This research will apply a Deconstructive theory of language to Imtiaz Dharker's poem 'A Century Later'.

The recent research conducted in this context is A Deconstructive Analysis of the poem Yellow Leaves by MR Gohar. Through Deconstructive analysis, the poem's text gives us aesthetic value, the power to generate new meanings and infinite sweetness. This study explores the implied thoughts and themes of the poem (Haider, 2022). Another published article is A Deconstructionist Reading of William Blake's A Poison Tree. This study explains that texts include contradictory elements which differ from what they intend to express. This brings instability of meaning within the text (Heider, 2012). A similar study was conducted, which shows that literary text can be interpreted from multiple perspectives. This paper's major motive demonstrates the text's potential to be creatively misread, generating various meanings and truths (Dhungel, 2022). The Road Not Taken is a well-known poem by Robert Frost. The study of this poem deconstructs the text and comes up with a new reading of the poem. It shows the aesthetic value of the poem (Al-Jumaily, 2017). John Donne is famous for his mastery of metaphysical conceits. The research was conducted on Donne's selected poems to reveal multiple layers of meaning, internal contradictions, and inconsistencies through a lens of Deconstruction (Khan, 2021).

The second wave of Feminism is closely associated with the issue of girls' education. This movement empowers women on sexuality and reproductive rights. It extends to other issues, including equal education opportunities, equal pay in the workplace, abortion rights, equal employment opportunities, women's safety, and childcare facilities (Mohajan, 2022).

The theme of Feminism is reflected in many other poems of Imtiaz Dharker, including 'A Century Later'. In the poem 'Purdah I', Dharker portrays purdah as a representative of patriarchy in society, which brutally violates women's freedom and transforms them into objects of abuse (Singh, 2015). Her poem 'Honor Killing' shows how a girl is expected to show modesty and is a victim of patriarchal marginalization (Bali, Women as Subalterns in Imtiaz Dharker's poetry, 2015). Other poems from her collection 'The Terrorist at my table' explain the feminist dilemma of a woman in a male-dominant society, the woman depicted as a subhuman, roles

assigned to her, status of a female child and treatment of women as a sex object (Jahangeer, 2017). In 'Tongue', Dharker requests society to give the right of speech to women. They suffer psychologically as they cannot voice their emotions (Alpa, 2019).

Only one study was published on critical analysis of 'A Century Later' poem. That research aimed to investigate the way a woman rises against patriarchy in the poem (Khan, 2021). The current study is conducted to fill the gap in research as there is no research conducted on the Deconstructive analysis of Imtiaz Dharker's poem, "A Century Later".

Methodology

The research method of this study is descriptive and qualitative. The poem, 'A Century Later' by Imtiaz Dharker, is taken as a sample, and Derrida's deconstruction theory is applied at three main levels: verbal, textual and linguistic, in the light of the model provided by (Barry, 1995). Through deconstruction, different possible interpretations combined to produce the literary text's meaning are interrogated. Deconstruction is a continuous process of investigating the structure of meaning, which leads to the possibility of revealing internal logic and the undecidability of ideas in the poem's text.

Analysis

Peter Barry claims that deconstruction is divided into three stages: Linguistic, Verbal, and Textual. This study reveals all the deconstructive elements present in the given poem.

The *Verbal Stage* highlights paradox, contradictions and common binary oppositions in the literary text. A paradox is a sentence or phrase which is not possible in reality.

"The school bell is a call to battle, every step to class, a step into the firing line."

These lines from the first stanza are paradoxical. The school bell signals the beginning and ending of class, break time, lunch and other curricular activities. It is an important tool for alerting students about the assembly or off time. It is also significant for staff members and teachers. However, the school bell indicates a call to battle along these lines. The call to battle has a tumultuous and chaotic connotation. This shows the struggle of young girls who are fighting for their right to education around the globe. The school bell here is not used like an ordinary bell that calls

students to school but is used as a call to the battlefield. Every morning when the girls get ready for school, they must endure all the difficulties and troubles that come their way. Every day is a new battle for them, and they must fight through it with great courage to receive an education. Each step the girls take to enter their classroom is similar to the steps the soldiers take to get their positions into the firing line. They stand in a line as opponents so that dominants can fire them. The young girls are forced to fight, which reveals the cruelty and immorality of society.

"The missile cuts a pathway in her mind,"

This line alludes to the incident of Malala Yousufzai, who was shot in the head by the Taliban on her way to school. Talibans are a sign of restrictions and the conservative minds of people. The poem throws light on the submissive role of women in society. The line, as mentioned above, is an example of a paradox. In reality, the missile cannot cut a pathway in someone's mind as it is with schoolgirls' strength and destructive power to ruin everything at its target. This line proves that bullets or missiles cannot diminish the schoolgirls' strength. When they take bullets in their heads, they have a realization about their war against the world which gives them more determination and strong willpower to fight for their right to education. They also get the sense of struggling for the freedom they were once deprived of.

"Bullet, she says, you are stupid. You have failed. You cannot kill a book or the buzzing in it."

These lines from the third stanza are also examples of paradox. A book is an inanimate object that cannot be killed or talked to. Here the poet is not talking about the book, but the idea behind it is that society cannot slaughter women's source of knowledge or destroy the sources of women's education. The word book also symbolizes the spark of hope for many girls. The revolution can never be stopped. The poet employs the literary device of onomatopoeia by using the word buzzing which represents the awakening of a new revolution. The bravery of young girls is glorified as the lines depict a young girl addressing the bullet for its uselessness. The bullet kills animate things and never fails to hit its target as soon as it is fired. As the above lines are paradoxes, they convey the message that a bullet cannot stop women from seeking education, nor can it kill the enthusiasm for knowledge within young girls.

"every step to class, a step into the firing line."

This line from the poem is contradictory as it represents the combination of ideas which are opposed to one another. This indicates the difficulty faced by young girls in holding perseverance. They prepare themselves just like the soldiers before going to a battlefield. They have to wear armour before entering the class to protect themselves from the brutality of society.

The poet uses binary opposition of the oppressor and the oppressed in the poem by using the imagery of a bullet and a book. Derrida asserts that one of the terms in binary opposition has a trace of the poem's opposite, and one term can mention the other. In deconstruction, we overturn the hierarchy by bringing low what is high.

The *Textual Stage* shows the poem's overall view, shifts and breaks. These shifts can be instability of attitude, the shift in pace, vocabulary, tone, time and point of view. We can analyze the shift from past to present, first-person to third-person pronouns.

After a close reading of the text, it is revealed that the poem uses the third person pronoun 'she, her', and then in the last stanza, the second person pronoun is used - 'you'. The poet has used present indefinite tense like 'The school bell is a call to battle' and 'Here is the target, fine skin at the temple' to make readers feel more immersed in the poem as they are experiencing the action of the poem. The writer uses the present tense to develop a close relationship with the readers. The poet also switches to past tense by using words such as 'Surrendered, surrounded, rounded' to manipulate the time and enhance the vividness of a narrative account. There is a change in attitude in the poem. The poet first mentions that the girl takes a bullet in her head, which shows that young girls are victims of patriarchy in society. Hence, the same bullet creates a sense of awareness in young girls to fight for their freedom and education. So instead of becoming a victim of bullets, the young girls rise stronger than ever, and their resilience is not diminished. The girls consider the bullet worthless as it cannot kill their source of knowledge, which is a book.

At the poem's beginning, the poet creates a gloomy atmosphere from the descriptions of battle, a firing line and a bullet, but as the poem progresses, we see that the girls have enough valour to face the bullet and missile. The women are depicted as passive, and their role is degraded in society. They are portrayed as the prey of patriarchy in the world. They are

marginalized in society, and certain restrictions are imposed on them. In the later part of the poem, the poet writes, "This girl has won, the right to be ordinary", which demonstrates that women outcast the idea of deprivation from receiving an education. A woman oppressed due to the subaltern psyche shows consistent bravery and challenges ferocity. She has no liberty to live a jubilant life, but her autonomy and self-determination cast away barriers to education. The lines "wear bangles to a wedding, paint her fingernails" reveals that women are restricted to living the life they desire. In our society, women are not allowed to wear bangles or paint their nails before marriage. However, the young girls have gained enough power and sturdiness to overcome obstacles and live ordinary lives. However, there is a shift in the poem when the poet explains that behind one girl, there is a swarm of other young girls who are now standing up to face the world. They are strong, try to curb social disease and are willing to unleash their potential.

There is also a shift in the tone of the poem. The poem starts with a disturbing tone, as shown by the vocabulary, such as a call to battle, firing line, target, surrendered, bullet, and missile. The innocence of young girls juxtaposes the old age battle they are being forced to fight. The speaker highlights the deadly weapons like bullets and missiles which are used against young girls. The tone is eerie, which suggests inherent wrongness. The last part of the poem refers to the ineffectiveness of the weapons and glorifies the audacity of young girls to withstand bullets and strive for their right to education. They rise as a symbol of tenacity and become steadfast against sly comments from society.

The poem's overall view demonstrates a very sensitive issue of girls being unable to pursue their education. The use of imagery reflects various struggles gone through by oppressed young girls. They have to fight in order to gain their basic right. The schoolgirls are shown as soldiers, and the school is described as a battlefield. Dharker expresses women's desire to be free from oppressive rules. The poem's last stanza explains that many girls worldwide have known their true worth and are now standing up to face the world. A swarm of young girls protesting for their basic rights emphasizes the intensity of the war between women and society. Young girls will ultimately win the battle with their optimistic and firm approach.

The *Linguistic Stage* involves looking for implicit or explicit references in the literary text. In this stage, the critic checks the unreliability of language and searches for words which are unsaid or impossible to explain something.

The poem relates the school bell to a call for battle. Males dominate females in the field of education. The school bell has cheering connotations, whereas the call to battle has depressing and unpleasant connotations. These lines explain that seeking education is no less than a battle for young girls. Every step they take towards class is like a step they take into the firing line. Here, the young girls are depicted as soldiers who take their position in firing lines before the battle starts. The young girls are seen as enemies as they stand in the firing lines so society can fire them. The lines, "surrendered, surrounded, she takes the bullet in the head," allude to Malala Yousufzai, the most active female student. She was shot in the head by the Taliban on her way to school. Taliban represent the extreme mindset of society that redefine and control education. They reveal the notion of gender discrimination. Malala is portrayed as a strong woman who raises her voice for all young girls. She gained international recognition. Instead of becoming a victim of patriarchy, she pursued her education and competed against dichotomy. She brought a sense of liberation to young girls.

Consequently, this brave girl has won the battle and gained public recognition. Now most of the girls around the world have received their right to education. Malala's incident is used as an implicit reference in the poem.

The lines "Bullet, she says, you are stupid. You have failed. You cannot kill a book or buzzing in it" is ambiguous. It is because a bullet is an inanimate object, and it is incapable of giving any response. Here the poet has personified the bullet as a person. The writer metaphorically conveys that a bullet cannot harm young girls with very strong dedication and passion for getting an education. It cannot ruin the pathway to women's enlightenment. Their inherent enthusiasm liberates them from a social prison. These lines explore the worthlessness of a bullet against women's empowerment.

"Cheek still rounded from being fifteen" is an explicit reference that indicates the innocence and youthfulness of young girls who are forced to suffer at the hands of a vicious and corrupt society. The lines from the third stanza, "Wear bangles to a wedding,

paint her fingernails, go to school, "reference women's independence. The poem elaborates that the women are deprived of the life they want. There are certain barriers to their freedom. Women are not allowed to wear bangles or put nail paint on their fingers because it is perceived as an indecent act before marriage. They do not have access to fulfil their desires because the clouds of injustice and oppression are always on their heads.

Dharker has an optimistic ideology and suggests that women can break conventionality and stand against the social system if they are adamant in their struggle for education and independence.

Imtiaz Dharker is a feminist writer whose writings mainly focus on the misery of women overpowered by an inhuman and corrupt male-dominant society. The poem "A Century Later" highlights the critical female condition in a patriarchal society and the struggle of young girls to rise against oppression and hegemonic masculinity. There are many aspects of the poem that reflect Feminism. The poem beautifully implies the incident of a young girl who was tried to be killed by the Taliban in response to her advocacy of education for girls. The poem explains the difficulties and pains young girls endure to reach school and seek education. Women cannot spend their life in their way. They cannot wear bangles and put nail polish on their fingers to adorn themselves due to the limitations enforced on them. Their progress in society is hindered because of injustice and discrimination in society. This poem throws light on a society where objectification, violence, restrictions, and subjugation of women have become a norm. The poet encourages and uplifts the spirit of young girls to rise and fight for their basic rights. Dharker admires the young girls' constant gallantry and strength for questioning savagery. All these references in the poem show its relatedness with the second wave of Feminism. This wave promotes gender equality in all aspects of life, including education. Feminist activists put efforts for greater access to education for girls and tried to end discriminatory practices. As a result, progress was made in improving girls' access to education during this movement. More girls began attending school, as the line "A murmur, a swarm. Behind her, one by one, the schoolgirls are standing up" from the poem indicates. The impact of the second wave of Feminism continues to be felt even today.

Conclusion

'A Century Later', when studied from a Deconstructive standpoint, reveals nothing stable and unified. This approach provides an innovative perspective to the study of literature. It proves that there is no single particular meaning in the text. The poem reveals how ideas, structures and meanings keep substituting for each other. Through Deconstructive analysis, we become aware of the possible interpretations and intentions of the literary text. The study illustrates the breaks or shifts in the text that create instability of meaning. At a verbal stage, paradoxes and contradictions are highlighted through close reading. The linguistic stage explored the explicit and implicit references in the poem.

In this poem, Imtiaz Dharker uses literary devices such as symbolism, personification, imagery, allusion and metaphors to give the poem an impressive and aesthetic touch. She uses rich visual imagery to unravel the struggles of women persecuted worldwide and how their perseverance drives freedom. These devices demonstrate conflicting meanings in the poem. Deconstructive analysis of this text informs us that a woman cannot be separated from her liberty and educational right. Women are represented as courageous soldiers who are on the winning belt.

Using poetic words, Dharker contextualizes her situation in the subcontinent and insists on society's orthodoxy. The poem illustrates the implied discourse of how dominating factors have regularized conventional beliefs in our culture and elucidates women's struggle against male superiority. Through profound analysis of the text, it is concluded that women's ability cannot be suppressed to stand against the despicable social system. With the application of Deconstruction theory, the researchers could critically analyze the poem, and hence the complexities involved in the poem are revealed.

The poem 'A Century Later' is significant concerning Feminism. The poem concerns young girls' struggles fighting for their right to education. It reveals the incident of Malala, who was attempted to be killed due to her campaign for women's education. In general, the poem raises questions about the maltreatment of women and social discrimination. The poet explains the condition of women as subordinate in society. Women's objectification and suppression worldwide played a key role in giving rise to the Feminist movement. The motive of feminist activists during the second wave of Feminism was that a woman is inextricable from her basic rights. Imtiaz Dharker conveys this same idea in her poem.

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