14. *‘Honour Killing’* by Imtiaz Dharker

In Lahore, in the last year of the twentieth century, a woman was shot by her family in her lawyer’s office. Her crime was that she had asked for a divorce. The whole Pakistan Senate refused to condemn the act. They called it an honour killing.

Although inspired by the killing of a woman in Lahore, this poem is representative of women from all cultures and faiths. It appears faith specific, but actually isn’t – for instance, the veil is obviously associated with Islam but the mangalsutra is a Hindu necklace. She describes herself as a Scottish Muslim Calvinist, and her husband is Hindu. As a cosmopolitan Muslim herself, Dharker presents the confluence of three cultures-Pakistani, British and Indian, to underscore the power dynamics which robs women of their identity and self-esteem.

‘Honour killing’ is a defiant, subtly politicised piece, beginning with an identity strip-tease, from clothing all the way down past the physical body; “what happens when the self squeezes past the easy cage of bone.”

The poem “Honour Killing” is more about a woman redefining her predicament of being born with limited choices, bowed down by the dictatorship of the consciousness of the womb and restrictions that come in the form of the ‘purdah’ or the ‘mangalsutra’. It is also about a system of demystification that takes place in such rigid societies where the female speaker considers signifiers, such as the veil and the ‘mangalsutra’ and the rings to be the metaphor of parochialism and orthodoxy.

The demystification takes place on three levels. At first, she discards the ‘purdah’, thus moving out of the ambit of Islam; then she takes off her ‘mangalsutra’ and the rings, thus moving out of the ambit of Hinduism. The idea is not to discard a particular religion but to give up all the shackles that bind her to the darkest interiors of the house. She is not allowed to have the space to either think or move and speak freely so she suffers from an irreparable identity crisis. Thus on the final level the poet decides to strip herself off her last skin.