

Linguistic Creativity in 'Worm Turned' by Imtiaz Dharker

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This essay assesses how certain linguistic features in Imtiaz Dharker's 'Worm, turned' (Dharker, 2009) contribute to the overall creativity of the poem. Creativity in this context is identified by its novelty, quality and appropriateness (Kaufman and Sternberg, 2010, p. xiii). 'Worm, turned' will be analysed through three perspectives - the textual, contextual and critical lenses (Demjén, 2017, pp. 27-41).

The textual lens investigates a text's written form. This includes its typography, orthography, form, lexical content, syntax, and phonology (Demjén, 2017, pp 27-28). The textual lens evaluates how strong or weak an image, simile or metaphor is, how pleasing or unsettling the metrical choices are, how complex or simple the syntactic structure is and so on. Discussion of semantic themes and social implications, as well as considerations of authorial intent, publication context and reader response are left to later lenses.

One simple textual creative choice made by Dharker is the use of kennings, e.g. "crowrasp" (l. 1) and "beakscrape" (l. 2). This technique of compounding words (Baldick, 2015) is a way of moving the text away from the normal style of daily conversation. As a result of this deviation "we are invited to look for a significance that goes beyond surface-level understanding" (Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010, p. 32). This is a defamiliarisation technique proposed originally by the early 20th-century Russian formalists (Demjén, 2017, p. 24). Parallelism, the repeated use of words or phrases within a group of sentences (Leech and Short, 2007), is another defamiliarisation technique and occurs here in the anaphoric use of the phrase, "I have seen such things (l. 7,8 and 11)" and its slight variation, "I have been allowed to see such things" (l. 25).

This device repetition both reinforces Dharker's personification of the worm into a sentient being, as well as foregrounding the worm's role of observing and reacting to its environment.

Dharker also uses phonological parallelism to achieve defamiliarisation, such as alliteration (a phonologic external stylistic deviation). The strong voiceless velar plosive <k> in "...copper, / coal in its glory, the remainder of kings, / clean bone..." (l. 11-13) is contrasted with the soft sibilance of the voiceless alveolar sibilant [s] sound in "slither" (l. 10) and in "...is worth something / when I have seen such things." (l. 15). The difference in hardness of the <k> to the soft sinewy snake-like [s] sounds associated with the worm, mimetically emphasise and foreground the special identity of the living worm, compared to inanimate copper, coal etc. Dharker also makes effective use of rhyme (another type of external deviation), e.g. "Slither, glimmer" and "Ivory, beauty, glory, mercy, hide me, protect me" (ll. 9-15). The change from first to second person narrative (ll. 16-19) is an internal deviation, that foregrounds the prayer like aspects of the fourth stanza.

The contextual lens "focuses on the social, cultural and historical context of language use" (Demjén, 2017, p. 31) and reflects on how language effects are dependent on the context in which it is used. Contextual aspects of a discourse can be evaluated using the SPEAKING grid (Setting, Participant, End, Act sequences, Key, Instrument, Norm, and Genre) (Johnstone and Marcellino, 2010, p. 61). Two grid attributes: setting ("the time and physical setting of communication") and genre ("type of event, e.g. lecture, poem, letter"), are considered here. Examining setting first, *Worm, turning* appears in a collection of Dharker's poems published in 2009 by BloodAxe Books, a highly regarded specialist poetry publisher of an eclectic, inclusive range of contemporary poets (BloodAxe Books, 2024). Thus, it is likely to incorporate the linguistic features known to educated 21st-century readers of English (a context that is actually

world-wide in the highly connected world of 2009). Secondly, the selected genre imposes a further constraining context. The use of poetic form using multi stanza, free verse dictates a specific layout on the page, i.e. the use of line breaks, blank lines between stanzas but the poetic form also contextually includes the expectation of the use of literary language and literary devices to convey meaning and theme. The fourth stanza, (ll. 16-23), has the textual features of a prayer including the use of the 2nd person POV (“You, the one ...”), the tone of supplication to a powerful deity (“old me...”, “wrap me...”, “save me”) and the religious vocabulary (“heaven”, “darkness”, “mercy”, “witness”, “messenger”, “creature”) and the use of rhetorical devices of repetition again (“wrap me ... save me”, “your darkness ... your mercy ... your messenger ... your creature”). This helps this stanza align with the context of a readership familiar with the vocabulary of monotheistic religions such as Christianity or Islam.

The critical lens views language as “a social activity that can reflect and reproduce social and political hierarchies and underlying systems of value and power” (Demjén, 2017, p. 37). Given Dharkar’s contemporary South Asian background and her life experiences as a “Scottish Muslim Calvinist adopted by India and engaged in a Welsh marriage” (Khair, 2005), the critical lens might view the worm as a representative of its own individual world (that of the soil) - a world that has been enriched or contaminated by external influences (gold, coal, burial bones). The prayer like content of stanza 4 suggests the worm may have had some sort of religious epiphany, perhaps as a consequence of these influences, suggesting this aspect of the poem draws on Dharkar’s own personal social, political and cultural experience. The crow has no understanding of the worm’s background (“The crow knows nothing”, (l. 4)) and thus represents the social and political threat that more powerful, colonial societies offer to weaker societies whose value the stronger societies do not recognise.

In conclusion, using combined textual, contextual and critical lenses, it can be seen that Dharkar's creative use of defamiliarisation produces a strong cognitive dissonance between the reader's perception of the real world and the world of the poem, investing the poem with questions of identity and belonging, and which foregrounds the ever-present threat of a more dominant culture (crow) to a weaker one (worm).

(999 words)