

3. "Blessing" by Imtiaz Dharker

POET

Imtiaz Dharker (1954-Present)

Imtiaz Dharker was born in Lahore, Pakistan, to Pakistani parents. When she was less than a year old, her parents moved to Glasgow where she was brought up. She writes poetry, as well as producing documentaries and films. She now lives in both Britain and Mumbai, India, feeling a strong affinity with both countries and cultures.

She has won the Queen's Gold Medal for her English poetry.

BACKGROUND

The poem describes the dry season in India when temperatures reach 40 degrees centigrade and there is no rain. At these times, the people who live in the slums of Mumbai suffer terribly from a lack of water. Dharker's poem describes events in the slums during a drought when a water pipe bursts.

SUMMARY

The poem is a celebration of the life-giving power of water. It describes in religious terms the miracle that water can bring to the poor living in the slums of Mumbai. At the beginning of the poem there is no water. It is a time of drought. However, when a pipe bursts, the children collect the gushing water and their bodies become glittering and perfect with the blessing of God.

ANALYSIS

The title of the poem "Blessing" introduces the religious diction of the piece straight away. A blessing is something given by God. It is often a source of protection or kindness. It also has a secondary meaning of a prayer said before or after a meal. Both these meanings are present in Dharker's poem which shows us the generosity of God to bring the children water during a drought, as well as the fact the water is like a meal or feast for them after a time of deprivation.

The poem is written in free verse with no fixed rhyme or rhythm. However, the stanzas are cleverly constructed. At the beginning, when there is no water, the stanzas are short and brief. It is as though the words are dried up. But when the water erupts from the pipe, the stanzas become long and flowing. Indeed, stanzas three and four are connected by enjambment or a poetry line which runs the sentence on to the next verse. This flowing syntax imitates the flowing water gushing from the broken pipe.

In stanza one, Dharker describes what a lack of water looks like. She uses a simile comparing "The skin" to "a pod" or seed. "The skin" here could be the surface of the earth, the soil itself. According to this reading, "The skin" is a personification of the ground of India as it responds to the climate around it. A more obvious reading, is that the "skin" is the skin of the people of Mumbai. It describes how their skin becomes dehydrated during the Dry season; it becomes so dry it begins to crack. This splitting apart is compared with a seed "pod" which usually falls from a plant and opens out spilling its seed in order to start new

life. The image is therefore dehydrated, but it also shows the potential for a new beginning to come from it.

The second line of the stanza is another very short sentence. This structure of brief complete sentences as lines, imitates the lack of water and flowing goodness during the drought. This sentence sums up the situation the people have found themselves in – “There never is enough water”. The word “never” emphasizes the constant lack of water which they experience. Cleverly, Dharker uses the word “water” only once in the poem. It is placed here at the beginning of the poem when there is not any. The word tells us what the poem is going to be about, but when the poet goes on to describe actual water she does not use the word again. Instead, she uses vivid descriptions to make us think about what water is really like.

Stanza two moves on to a powerful description of the beauty of water when you do not have it. It begins with the word “Imagine”. This is an instruction or imperative to the reader, who is probably not lacking in water, to place themselves in the shoes of these people and empathize. We are asked to imagine “the drip of it”. This prompts a sound memory of water which is underlined by the sibilance in the next line “small splash”. The repeated ‘s’ makes a pleasing flowing sound which resembles the noise of water moving. The fact the poem begins with a “drip” also creates a sense of pace. We start with no water, then we imagine a little, and finally we are treated to a description of lots of it cascading out.

Stanza two ends with a wonderful metaphor comparing the sound of water “in a tin mug” with “the voice of a kindly god”. The reader can imagine the tinkling, bell-like sound water dripping on tin might make. This is then described as a voice; it is a personification. It is as though the water speaks to us. The voice is from a “kindly god”. Here Dharker tells us that water is holy, or given by god. She makes us think about how precious and miraculous it is by imagining what it’s like not to have any. Importantly, the god who speaks like water is “kindly”, just as water itself is a benevolent element, bringing life to the world.

Stanza three moves us on to an event which happens in Mumbai, “Sometimes”. This word underlines the rarity of this happening. It shows how special it is when it occurs. Dharker goes on to explain that occasionally there is “the sudden rush of fortune”. This is a metaphor for the water pipe gushing. It compares the rupture to a “rush” or hurried outpouring of something. The moment the pipe bursts is a moment of “fortune”. Here “fortune” means good luck. Therefore the breaking of the pipe, which some might see as an accident which needs to be repaired, is characterised as a great outpouring of luck.

Dharker explains that when the “municipal pipe bursts silver crashes to the ground”. The water coming out of the pipe is described through a metaphor of treasure; it is like a precious metal, silver, cascading forth. Silver is a good image for water here as it has the same white shine to it as water. It is also a precious metal which is sometimes used to create coins or money. Dharker is showing that water is more valuable to these people than money, when they are thirsty and hot. The word “crashes” emphasizes the weight of the water flowing out. This makes it seem heavy and full; there is a lot of water.

The stanza runs on with lots of enjambment, creating a sense of the water flowing out. The poet continues “the flow has found a roar of tongues”. The alliteration of the ‘f’ sound here underlines the rapid pace of the escaping water. There is then a metaphor comparing the voices of the people with the “roar” of an animal. The word “roar” suggests the people’s

voices are not forming words; they are simply howling their appreciation for this miracle. "roar" also implies the loudness of the voices. They seem to be deafening. Finally, the "roar" brings the "tongues" of the people into one voice. Therefore they are united by this happy event of water in a hot, dry season.

The unifying nature of the water is emphasized by the continuing diction of religion on the next line. The people come as "a congregation". A "congregation" is a gathering of a community, usually in a church. Therefore the eruption of the pipe has brought together the people of the slum as one group ready to worship the god - water. In order to save the miracle of the water, the people dash to get containers for it, "pots, brass, copper, aluminium, plastic buckets". The eagerness with which the people try to collect the water is shown in the random objects they find to put it in. The stanza ends with an image of their haste as the people have "frantic hands". If something is "frantic" it is hurried, excited and disorganised. Dharker captures the happy chaos the water has caused.

The last sentence of stanza three runs on to stanza four. This enjambment imitates the flow of the water from the pipe. In the final stanza, Dharker describes the children enjoying the water and being transformed by it. The water is described as "liquid sun". This metaphor captures the shining brightness of the water. It shows how beautiful it is. The "naked children" play in the water and their skin, which began the poem dry and cracked "like a pod", is now "polished to perfection". The alliteration of the 'p' sound here emphasizes the harmony and glossiness which the water gives to the children's skin. They are shining in the "flashing light". The sun is sparkling off their wet bodies and creating flashes. Thus the water is miraculously transforming the children into jewels, sparkling.

These sight images of the water contrast the sound images from the beginning of the poem and affirm the way the element changes the people into something blessed and glowing. The final lines of the poem describe the gift God has given the children through the water – "as the blessing sings over their small bones". The water is "the blessing". Here "sings" is reminding us of the voice of the "kindly god" from the second stanza. The verb to sing also describes something positive and joyful which the water has brought to the children. Moreover singing is something congregations do in church to celebrate God. Therefore the water has brought about a moment of worship. The good fortune of the blessing plays across the "small bones" of the children. This final description shows the difference the water makes to the dried bodies of the people. It leaves the reader with a happy image of playing children who have been brought to life by the gift of water.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

"Prayer Before Birth" – provides a comparison between the anxieties of the unborn child about the world and the miraculous good fortune of these children who actually live in hardship.

"Hide and Seek" – provides interesting comparisons between the boy who is excluded by his community during the game, and the community which comes together here through the miracle of unexpected good fortune.

“War Photographer” – provides comparisons between the photographer who tries to raise awareness of the hardships people in other countries suffer, and the people of the slums who find a moment of happiness within that suffering.

“The Tyger” – provides comparisons between the poet wondering at the gifts God gives which are violent and dangerous, and the blessing given here of water in a time of drought.