

ASM TUITION ACADEMY

A CENTURY LATER

A century later

by Imtiaz Dharker

The school bell is a call to battle,
every step to class, a step into the firing line.
Here is the target, fine skin at the temple,
cheek still rounded from being fifteen.

Surrendered, surrounded, she
takes the bullet in the head

and walks on. The missile cuts
a pathway in her mind, to an orchard
in full bloom, a field humming under the sun,
It's lap open and full of poppies.

This girl has won
the right to be ordinary,

wear bangles to a wedding, paint her fingernails,
go to school. Bullet, she says, you are stupid.
You have failed. You cannot kill a book
or the buzzing in it.

A murmur, a swarm. Behind her, one by one,
the schoolgirls are standing up
to take their places on the front line.

'A Century Later' begins with the [speaker](#) describing the school bell as an announcement of conflict. Each step taken by students to class is one further into mortal danger. The target is revealed to be a

young girl who is just 15 years old. She is relinquished and encircled by those who would do her harm. A bullet then strikes her in the head. But the girl keeps walking. The projectile travels through her mind, arriving at an idyllic grove filled with flowers and whirring with life beneath the sun.

The speaker declares that the girl has earned the privilege to be normal. She should be able to enjoy joys like attending a wedding, painting her fingernails, or just simply going to class, without worrying about being the victim of more violence. The girl addresses the bullet calling it stupid for thinking it could kill the ideas and beliefs in her head.

A Century Later relies on Dharker's arresting imagery to paint a vivid [juxtaposition](#) of oppressive violence and defiant beauty. Two scenes in the poem perfectly depict those motifs: when the bullet strikes the young girl in the head, the resulting bloodshed is replaced with a radiant vision of blooming life; and the rising of the schoolgirls, a grim indication they're also victims of such violence, to take their place "on the front line." Like the rest of the poem, they use a language typical of those orchestrating acts of war or terror. Yet the brutal and vicious [connotations](#) of her diction do little to overshadow the enduring promise of resistance that's evoked by both the imagery of the orchard and the rebelliously advancing girls. That isn't to say the poem is purely hopeful or triumphant. Dharker's decision to end the poem on the stirring but ultimately woeful sight of schoolgirls on the front lines of a conflict invokes hard questions that wrestle with the reasons for such a tragic reality. One where a child is forced to live under the threat of constant violence.

STANZA 1:

'A Century Later' opens with a powerfully sobering [metaphor](#) that identifies the "school bell" as "a call to battle." One that places every student who travels from class to class in the crosshairs of violence. The primary target is a young girl, with "fine skin at the temple, / cheek still rounded from being fifteen," she steps into the "firing line." Dharker's juxtaposition of the girl's youthfulness alongside the poem's lethal diction results in a disquieting tension — [foreshadowing](#) an impending [tragedy](#) while also revealing two of the poem's central motifs.

STANZA 2:

The second [stanza](#) is a short [couplet](#) that envisions the girl introduced in the first [quatrain](#) being shot. Just before she becomes the victim of this attack, Dharker's diction once again evokes military language, as she is "surrendered, surrounded." The bullet strikes the girl in the head — a startling image that's made all the more jarring by the candidness with which it's delivered.

STANZA 3:

Stanza three of *'A Century Later'* continues the scene described in the previous one using [enjambment](#). The bullet doesn't even break the girl's stride and she "walks on" in defiance and stunningly unfazed. As the "missile cuts / a pathway in her mind," Dharker manifests another potent juxtaposition of images. In [contrast](#) to the assailing bullet, a [symbol](#) and literal harbinger of death, we're granted a glimpse of radiant and flourishing life. The destructive violence caused by a gun might cut through flesh and bone — but it's powerless to destroy the beauty, wonder, and life that occupies the mind of a young girl. These it cannot hope to damage and instead only passes through them.

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STANZA 5:

Dharker uses enjambment to connect the fourth and fifth [stanzas](#), cataloguing all the ways the girl might enjoy her ordinary life. From simple delights like dressing for a wedding celebration and painting her nails to just being able to attend classes without fear. This earnest desire on the part of the speaker gives way to a glimpse into the girl's mind. Here, the violence of the bullet is met with her unbending defiance, calling the deadly projectile "stupid" and mocking its utter failure. Not of successfully taking her life — but rather the assumption made by those who pulled the trigger that such an object would obliterate her pursuit of an education. "You cannot kill a book / or the buzzing in it," she boldly informs her assailants.

STANZA 6:

In the last stanza of *'A Century Later'* the speaker hears "a murmur, a swarm."

This [ambiguous](#) diction calls to mind a noisy horde, which might be interpreted as another example of Dharker's militaristic diction. Yet it also calls to mind the "humming" field seen

in stanza three and associates it with the girl's unyielding mind. This is further evidenced by the source of the sound: "One by one, / the schoolgirls are standing up." It's unclear who these allies are, whether they're past victims or other girls who've risen in solidarity, but the image instills their unwavering fearlessness.

THEMES

A Century Later' has two main themes, along with the themes mentioned in the Poetry+ Review Corner:

1. **Ideas and the Will are Bulletproof:** The overarching theme of Dharker's poem is best summed up in the revelatory words of the young girl, "You cannot kill a book / or the buzzing in it." A bullet might have the destructive power to end a life but it cannot hope to ever scathe the ideas found inside a book or while earning an education. Nor can it stop those ideas from blossoming into something beautiful. A body can be killed but the will of an individual and the beliefs that propel them are invulnerable to such violence.
2. **A Refusal to Yield to Terror:** In [juxtaposing](#) images and [symbols](#) of violence with one's of life and nature, Dharker builds toward the defiance expressed by its last three stanzas. Her diction — "won" and "wedding," all point to a victory on the girl's part — but the bullet is derided for being "stupid" and having "failed." This fierce rebuke bolsters the impact of the sixth stanza, lending the swarming rise of schoolgirls a foreboding but ultimately empowering refusal to let fear or terror dissuade them.

LITERARY DEVICE

'A Century Later' uses some of the following literary devices:

- **Metaphor:** In the poem's opening lines, "The school-bell is a call to battle, / every step to class, a step into the firing-line" (1-2), Dharker uses an extended metaphor to accentuate the violence that fills the moments between classes, underscoring the danger of pursuing an education as a young girl.
- **Visual Imagery:** The poet also sketches a fragmented image of the girl, her "fine skin at the temple, / cheek still rounded from being fifteen" (3-4), detailed but also vague enough to be a symbol for all girls at risk or victims of such violence.
- **Kinaesthetic Imagery:** "The missile cuts / a pathway in her mind" (7-8) that illustrates the trajectory and movement of the bullet.
- **Auditory Imagery:** "A murmur, a swarm" (17) evokes the low, indistinct sound of a large mass of people.
- **Personification:** Dharker imbues nature with human abilities and characteristics in the lines, "a field humming under the sun, / its lap open and full of poppies" (9-10)

COMPARISON

1-WITH THE NAME

2-JOURNEY

3- THIRTEEN

4- HOMING

The comparison between "A Century Later" by Imtiaz Dharker and the poems "The Name", "Journey", "Thirteen", and "Homing" revolves around themes of identity, self-discovery, gender, cultural heritage, and the transformative journey of the self. Each poem uniquely explores these subjects, with particular attention to the female experience.

1. A Century Later by Imtiaz Dharker

- **Themes:** Gender inequality, freedom, education, and oppression.
- **Tone and Style:** Reflective and empowering, "A Century Later" focuses on the fight for women's rights, specifically linking the progress from the women's suffrage movement to the contemporary struggles of girls around the world. The poem celebrates achievements but also highlights the persistence of gender oppression, showing that while progress has been made, there is still work to be done.

- **Imagery:** Dharker uses symbols of freedom like dancing and reading, juxtaposed with the image of a girl still waiting for her future to unfold, her freedom constrained by societal forces.

2. The Name by Agha Shahid Ali

- **Themes:** Memory, loss, cultural heritage, and identity.
- **Tone and Style:** In "**The Name**", Ali reflects on the weight of one's name and the cultural and familial legacy it carries. It explores the tension between individual identity and collective memory, particularly in the context of exile and dislocation.
- **Comparison:** While "**A Century Later**" looks outward at societal progress and gender struggles, "**The Name**" looks inward, meditating on personal history and identity. Both poems highlight the weight of heritage and identity, but Dharker focuses more on external, societal barriers, while Ali reflects on internal, personal ones.

3. Journey by Gieves Patel

- **Themes:** Self-discovery, transformation, and the passage of time.
- **Tone and Style:** "**Journey**" explores personal growth and transformation, often using travel as a metaphor for the spiritual and emotional path one takes through life. Patel focuses on the internal evolution of the self as one moves through different phases of existence.
- **Comparison:** "**Journey**" is closely related to "**A Century Later**" in its focus on progress, but Patel's poem is more concerned with the internal journey, whereas Dharker's poem is about external societal progress for women. Both emphasize the idea of an ongoing process, whether it's personal growth or societal change.

4. Thirteen by Imtiaz Dharker

- **Themes:** Adolescence, change, and gender.
- **Tone and Style:** Dharker's "**Thirteen**" deals with the transition from childhood to adolescence, particularly from the perspective of a girl becoming aware of her gender and societal expectations. It reflects the confusion, tension, and self-awareness that come with growing up.
- **Comparison:** "**A Century Later**" and "**Thirteen**" share the theme of girlhood and societal constraints. While "**A Century Later**" looks at the broader, historical context of women's rights, "**Thirteen**" narrows the focus to the personal and intimate experience of growing up as a girl. Both poems reflect on the limitations imposed on women, whether through history or the onset of puberty.

5. Homing by Imtiaz Dharker

- **Themes:** Belonging, cultural heritage, and identity.
- **Tone and Style:** In "**Homing**", Dharker explores the idea of finding one's place in the world, both physically and emotionally. The poem reflects on displacement, the search for home, and the reconciliation of different aspects of identity, particularly within a diasporic context.

- **Comparison:** Like "A Century Later", "Homing" deals with the concept of belonging and identity. However, "Homing" is more concerned with cultural and geographical displacement, while "A Century Later" addresses gender oppression and societal progress. Both poems consider how external forces shape personal identity, but Dharker's "A Century Later" focuses more on collective gender struggles, while "Homing" is more personal and reflective of cultural roots.
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Shared Themes and Differences

1. **Identity:**
All the poems explore identity, whether through gender, personal heritage, or cultural legacy. "A Century Later" focuses on gender identity within the context of societal progress, while "The Name" and "Homing" delve into the personal and cultural aspects of identity. "Thirteen" examines identity from the perspective of a young girl transitioning into adolescence.
 2. **Progress and Struggle:**
"A Century Later" and "Journey" focus on the notion of progress—Dharker's through a feminist lens, and Patel's through the personal journey of self-discovery. Both highlight the idea of a path that is being carved, whether by societal change or personal growth.
 3. **Heritage and Belonging:**
In "The Name" and "Homing", the poets reflect on belonging and heritage. These themes are somewhat present in "A Century Later", as the poem refers to historical struggles for women's rights, but Dharker's other works focus more deeply on personal and cultural belonging.
 4. **Oppression and Liberation:**
"A Century Later" highlights external oppression and the ongoing fight for freedom, whereas "Thirteen" reflects the internalized gender norms that begin shaping a young girl's identity. Both poems touch on the constraints society places on women, though one looks at this from a broader perspective, and the other in a more intimate, personal light.
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In conclusion, "A Century Later", "The Name", "Journey", "Thirteen", and "Homing" all engage with the exploration of identity, struggle, and transformation, albeit through different lenses—whether it's gender, personal growth, cultural heritage, or societal progress. Each poem highlights different aspects of what it means to exist within, and sometimes in opposition to, the forces that shape our lives and identities.