*Living Space*

by **Imtiaz Dharker**

There are just not enough

straight lines. That

is the problem.

Nothing is flat

or parallel. Beams

balance crookedly on supports

thrust off the vertical.

Nails clutch at open seams.

The whole structure leans dangerously

towards the miraculous.

Into this rough frame,

someone has squeezed

a living space

and even dared to place

these eggs in a wire basket,

fragile curves of white

hung out over the dark edge

of a slanted universe,

gathering the light

into themselves,

as if they were

the bright, thin walls of faith.

The poem describes a ramshackle living space, with its lack of 'straight lines' and beams 'balanced crookedly on supports'. Imtiaz Dharker has explained that the poem describes the slums of Mumbai, where people migrate from all over India in the hope of a better life. The slum areas are living spaces created out of all kinds of found materials: corrugated sheets, wooden beams and tarpaulin. In this poem she celebrates the existence of these living spaces as a miracle.

The lines of the buildings are slanting and unstable, balancing precariously between dangerous and 'miraculous'. The eggs in a basket that hang out 'over the dark edge' are an act of faith, not only because someone has so delicately placed them in such a ramshackle environment, but also because they contain new life. The eggs, like the buildings are miracles.

It may seem like an act of faith to live in one of these rough structures - a daring attempt to live in such a place. In this way the poem represents the fragility of human life and celebrates the way that faith brings boldness.

# Themes



The fragile nature of slum buildings is explored in the poem

A number of unifying ideas or [**themes**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/z9y76fr/revision/2#glossary-zgry9j6) run through the poem. Different readers may attach more or less significance to each of these themes, depending upon how they view the poem.

| **Theme** | **Evidence** | **Analysis** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Fragility**: the building structures and the eggs are both fragile. The buildings have no 'straight lines' and are held together by nails that 'clutch at open seams'. | 'fragile curves of white/ hung out over the dark edge' | Like the buildings, the eggs are in a position of danger. Where the buildings threaten to collapse, the eggs are hanging out into the darkness where they could easily fall and smash. |
| **Faith**: to live in a space that is unstable and apparently verging on collapse requires a strong faith in the building's structure. | 'The whole structure leans dangerously / towards the miraculous.' | The adverb 'dangerously' contrasts with the word 'miraculous'. One makes us fearful and the other implies awe. It seems to be a miracle that the structure stays intact at all. |
| **Boldness**: there is a boldness implied in the way that people squeeze into these structures and, despite the apparent danger, create a living space. They add ordinary objects to make a home, hanging wire baskets of eggs in the same way people would in more sturdy buildings. | 'and even dared to place/ these eggs in a wire basket' | The word 'dared' shows that the speaker has a sense of wonder at the way people are living here. The eggs are a symbol of the people's boldness. |

| **Interpretation** | **Reason for interpretation** |
| --- | --- |
| The buildings are unstable and the fixings are loose. | The nails are not actually joining anything together and the whole structure is 'open' and exposed. |
| The nails are personified and seem to want to join the structure more solidly. | The word 'clutch' gives the nails a human characteristic and implies that they are desperately reaching forward. However there is nothing for them to grasp, only 'open seams'. |
| Like the eggs, the nails represent faith. | The word 'clutch' is used as a verb in this line, but it is also a collective noun (a word that describes a collection of things) describing a group of eggs. In this way, the poet links the nails and the eggs showing how each of them represent faith. |

**Interpretation of the line:** 'as if they were the bright, thin walls of faith.'

| **Interpretation** | **Reason for interpretation** |
| --- | --- |
| The eggs are a symbol of hope. | The 'bright' eggs contrast with the 'dark edge/ of a slanted universe.' They stand out as something white, pure and whole against a broken dark world. |
| Faith is precarious too. | The 'walls of faith' are 'bright' which implies something positive, but they are also 'thin' which suggests fragility. Perhaps the poet feels that faith, like the shell of an egg, is easy to break. |

# Form, structure and language

# Form and structure

Living Space is written in one long thin [**stanza**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/z9y76fr/revision/4#glossary-zsmwtfr) with 22 short lines. Each line varies in length. The longest, 'The whole structure leans dangerously', appears considerably longer on the page than the others, perhaps echoing the fact the whole structure is leaning over. The effect of this is to create a poem that appears as precarious as the physical structures it describes. The lines of different lengths seem to jut out into the page like some of the crooked beams the poet presents.

There are some instances of rhyme in the poem (that/flat, beams/seams, space/place, white/light). In these cases the rhyme acts as a way of holding the poem together. In that respect, the rhymes are similar to the nails in the poem which are attempting to lend stability to the overall structure.

Dharker uses [**enjambment**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/z9y76fr/revision/4#glossary-z6292hv) throughout this poem with lines spilling over into one another. This reflects the way the slum structures lean over and on top of each other.

The first half of the poem describes the structure. From line 11 onwards we are presented with an image of something inside: people living in the space, and the eggs hanging in a basket. This makes the second half of the poem more hopeful, as if showing the power of faith.

# Language

The poet presents us with an image, like a snapshot or photograph of a moment in time. The language used is simple and focuses on the shape of the structure. Words like 'crookedly', 'balance', 'leans' and 'slanted' emphasise the instability of the living space.

There is a contrast between dark and light with the bright image of the curved smooth eggs standing out against the darkness of the 'slanted universe'.

## Comparison of 'Living Space' by Imtiaz Dharker and 'Cozy Apologia' by Rita Dove

## Similarities

* Both poems describe a precarious contentment. In Living Space, the houses themselves are unstable and in Cozy Apologia, the imminent storm threatens upheaval. However, the people in both situations seem content with their place in the world.
* They use a conversational style that includes the reader.
* Both poems refer to faith.
* They describe an immediate experience.

## Differences

* Imtiaz Dharker uses a distant voice. Rita Dove uses first-person narrative.
* Dharker uses a single [**stanza**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/z9y76fr/revision/5#glossary-zsmwtfr) and short irregular lines.
* Dharker uses language of instability whereas Dove uses language associated with a domestic and office environment.