

**Voice of the Silenced and the Marginalised: Survival Rhetoric and Resistance of a Pakistani Muslim Woman in Tehmina Durrani's Autobiography *My Feudal Lord***

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**Abstract**

*Though considerable changes can be located in the lives of Muslim women in Pakistan with the progress of time, even now the identity, personality and individuality of women are curbed and crippled in the name of Islam and Islamic scriptures like the Qur'an and the Hadith so much so that these women are relegated to the margins. The publication of Tehmina Durrani's autobiography *My Feudal Lord* in 1991 resulted in dispute and discord because of her endeavour to portray a picture of degradation and dehumanization of Muslim women in the hands of patriarchy. Through her autobiographical account, she narrates how she has been silenced, suppressed and oppressed by her authoritarian and overpowering husband, Mustafa Khar. But her autobiography is not only an account of marginalization and subjugation of Muslim women in the Pakistani society but also an exposition of the voice of the narrator who wants to shatter and batter the establishment of patriarchy, thereby giving voice to the traditional silence— an attempt to throw away the stigma of marginality. The purpose of this article is to argue how Tehmina Durrani has sketched a real picture of the predicament of women in the Pakistani society through her personal account and at the same time, how she throws a crushing blow against the patriarchal establishment, thereby striving to construct an identity of her own and leaving a path for other Muslim women to follow in their quest for liberation and freedom.*

**Keywords:** *Islam, Pakistan, Tehmina Durrani, marginality and identity.*

**Introduction**

Ever since the publication of Tehmina Durrani's autobiography *My Feudal Lord*, it has been recognised as a controversial and contentious work in the Pakistani Muslim society because for the first time a Pakistani woman “writes about expounders of male supremacy and denounces their hidden mentality that firmly believes in female suppression” (Thakur 432),

thereby making a vigorous endeavour to uproot the establishment of patriarchy. When the first edition of the book was issued in 1991, Durrani was addressed as an adulteress and opportunist and her life-narrative simply as an erotica. Censorship is imposed on a feminist text so as to check and choke the public voice of a woman because patriarchy reigns on the subjugation of women and their quiet endurance. Through her narrative, Durrani attempts to unmask the hypocrisy of the aristocratic feudal lords, representatives of the patriarchal set up of the Pakistani society, who suppress and oppress Muslim women both physically and psychologically in the name of Islam, thereby achieving their aim of disparaging and denigrating women and, therefore, thrusting them to the margin as well as keeping the unobstructed rule of the patriarchy intact. The purpose of this article is to argue how the patriarchal framework marginalises women in the Pakistani society and how Tehmina Durrani, a Pakistani woman, undertakes her journey from the other to the centre, thereby unframing the frames of marginality.

#### **Status of Women in the Muslim Societies: An Overview**

In most of the Muslim countries, the social position of women is both a questionable and disputable issue. In the Islamic societies, gender disparity can be observed in almost each and every aspect of their lives. In her article, “Pakistani Women and Education: The Shifting Pattern of Ethnicity and Class”, Marie Lall researches on the four provinces of Pakistan (Rural Punjab, Balochistan, Rural Sindh and Karachi) and assures that there is an extreme inequality between the boys and girls in their access to education. She gives emphasis on the Pakistani government’s lack of attention in developing the basic infrastructure of government schools which leads the conservative Pakistanis to restrain the young girls from enrolment and continuing their education, as she opines— “The lack of physical infrastructure is a particular barrier for girls to access education, as families feel that schools without a boundary wall are unsafe, and schools without toilets are simply not an option” (204), thereby providing a route to the marginalisation of women in the field of education. As a result, in the Islamic societies women face “serious deprivation and discrimination” (Okon 27). Prof. Okon further declares, “The illiteracy level in most female Muslim population is high. Women are not allowed access to the educational opportunities that are available to men” (27).

The discrimination and indigence that the Islamic womanhood experiences in education can be found, perhaps more fiercely, in other aspects of their lives. There has been a feverish debate about the role Muslim women play in Islam and the status that they experience accordingly. But unfortunately, in most of the Muslim countries, it can be located that women are treated inferior to men or they are regarded as the second sex, and here Islamic fundamentalism plays a significant part behind such treatment. It is argued:

Historically, religion has contributed to the marginalization of women. Religion has provided the platform for male domination of society. As a social anaesthesia, and a lullaby that soothes and assuages revolutionary tendencies and hinders rebellion, religion has consoled women to accept their fate as the will of God. This is a negative social function and *a distortion of reality*....Because of religious indoctrination, the superiority of men over women is taken for granted. (Okon 21; emphasis added)

Religion becomes the most predominant apparatus in the hands of patriarchy in their accomplishment of the operation of power over women. The Islamic scholars known as Islamic feminists<sup>1</sup> claim that nowhere in Islam the superiority of men has been acknowledged; instead, patriarchy interprets the religious texts like the Qur'an and the Hadith and provides us with a false account of reality so as to negate the privilege of women in the society, thereby driving away women from the mainstream and keeping them at the margin of the society. They question the prevalent discourse of the Asian and African countries by subverting religious indoctrination that is responsible for the subjugation of women and attempt "to construct a new and more egalitarian understanding of their religion in order to change old mind-sets and cultural practices that purport to be Islamic" (Badran 249).

### **Women and Marginality in *My Feudal Lord***

Tehmina Durrani's autobiography *My Feudal Lord* is an enthralling account of real life experiences of a Pakistani Muslim woman who personally goes through claustrophobic and tempestuous ambience created by the patriarchy. Through her life-narrative, she endeavours to draw a picture of the lives of women of the Pakistani society in general. Her riveting narrative uncovers the vulnerable predicament of Pakistani women before the world and thus stirs the root of Pakistani society. What captivates the readers is that at the end, the narrator keeps aside her marginal identity and constructs her own identity which challenges and then turns upside down the dominant order. In her autobiography, she herself declares that her purposes behind writing this book are "to cast a stone at hypocrisy" (375) and also "to break the traditional silence" (375). It cannot be denied that Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* is the first proclamation against the patriarchal social order in the history of Pakistan.

The author has divided her autobiography into three parts, namely— "Lion of the Punjab", "Law of the Jungle" and "Lioness". Interestingly, the titles of the three parts of the book are symbolic in nature. Whereas in the first two parts, the writer depicts the suppression of the female narrator by her hypocritical husband, in the final part, she describes her triumph in dismantling the hypocrisy and her liberation from the heart of darkness which simply tries to amputate her individuality and crush her personality.

The autobiography narrates Durrani's tumultuous relationship with her second husband, Ghulam Mustafa Khar, the former chief minister of the Punjab, generally acknowledged as "*Sher e Punjab*" ("Lion of the Punjab"). In her life-story, she catalogues the rules maintained and the acts performed by a feudal lord in the Pakistani society. While chronicling the history of the uprising of the feudal lords in the social and political affairs of Pakistan, Durrani hints at the paradox by declaring— "A feudal lord was an absolute ruler who could justify any action" (41), thereby assuring the facts that they are dictators in their approach and domineering in their attitude. Mustafa has been "authoritarian, conservative and overpowering" (39) in his outlook to life. The author describes how women become victims in the reign of Mustafa Khar. He regards marriage not as a sanctified institution but simply as a mechanism of satisfying his carnal desire. The narrator gives a detailed account of Mustafa's treatment towards women. At first, he marries Wazir, his illiterate cousin and leaves her when she is pregnant. After that, he is married to a divorcee, Firdaus and divorces her when she delivers a son in the hospital. Next, he weds Safia, a modern girl, but immediately he sends his modern wife "beyond the veil" (45) where her only aim is "to live in anticipation of his infrequent visits" (45). Then he marries Naubahar, a professional dancer and discards her without delay under political pressure. Under the influence of Bhutto, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, he gets married to Shahrazad or Sherry who features Mustafa as "a grotesque sadist" (94), and further adds, "Women were his obvious victims. He was out to destroy us" (95). The domination over women and the annihilation of their spirit is the framework of Pakistani society which "operates on the agency of patriarchy, politics and male chauvinism in order to restrict the female potential and the freedom of expression" (Thakur 434).

Immediately after her marriage to Mustafa Khar, Durrani realizes the lacuna between her expectation and reality. She is subject to physical assault almost regularly. She realizes that Mustafa has crushed her spirit. She discerns that ever since her marriage she has been "clinically dead" (176). Her bed-chamber has immediately transformed into "torture chamber" (114), and the condition of her life under the rule of Mustafa is akin to that of the Jews in the concentration camp.

The author perceives that there is not an iota of love in their relationship. Domestic violence becomes more horrific, horrendous and abominable when a woman is sexually abused by her husband. Durrani shares her gruesome experience:

Never before had I felt *so totally humiliated, so utterly controlled*. I could see on his face the awareness of the importance of this moment. This episode would *cripple my spirit— perhaps beyond salvation*. From this moment forward, it would be nearly impossible for me to function as an individual.

There was not an iota of self-esteem left. The shame had burned it down to ashes. I was *exposed as nothing*. (100; emphasis added)

Gradually the narrator is reduced to nothing but a substance which is physically alive but psychologically dead. Mustafa not only incapacitates her spirit and maims her honour but, like an ever-watching warden, also controls her thought. This continuous humiliation and dehumanization result in trauma that leaves lifelong impact upon the life of a Pakistani woman.

In her autobiography, the female-narrator divulges another calamitous chapter in the lives of the Pakistani girls before their marriage. The conservative Pakistani household is enough to obliterate the identity and individuality of a girl. Her life has been ruled by “a lengthy list of don’ts” (28) followed by maintaining “an inviolate distance between myself and the masculine world” (28). But the paradox is that the future of that conservative girl depends on her marriage to a man even without caring for personal happiness. She draws the discrepancy between marriage and broken marriage or divorce and adds that whereas marriage is regarded as “a sacred and irrevocable institution” (29), divorce is “a reflection of a woman’s failure” (29); whereas the former is “purgatory” (77), the latter is “hell” (77).

Durrani refers to a number of practices or customs of the Islamic societies which are undoubtedly the mechanisms of the marginalization of women. The custom of triple *talak* uttered by a husband in order to accomplish his desire of divorcing his wife as per his interest further sweeps away women from the prevailing discourse. Besides, the practice of *khula*<sup>2</sup> and the Qur’anic laws like Hudood Ordinance and its wrong interpretation are the modus operandi of hegemonizing and tyrannizing women of the society. Regarding the multifarious levels of the marginalization of Durrani, Prof. Shivani Thakur remarks, “The expectations and restraints placed on her because of her gender make her to seek fulfilment in domesticity, obedience and silence, which results in her disappearance from the main stream”(434).

In *My Feudal Lord*, Tehmina Durrani proclaims that some of the feudal families use Islam as “a weapon of control” (40) in order to execute their task of affirming superiority over women. They wrongly elucidate most of the verses of the holy Qur’an and propagate their falsified interpretations so as to curb the vigour, vitality and strength of the gentle sex. This distortion of actuality has rightly been criticized as it is argued:

Islam has given women their full rights, proclaiming and establishing this with clear explicit texts. These texts cannot be altered nor denied. It has prohibited female infanticide, offered guidelines for their upbringing in order to protect them throughout their lives and stipulated for them mercy and love....Islam has given women the protection and security they need which they had lacked

through the centuries and which they still lack in many so-called civilized societies that claim to uphold human rights. (Naseef 47-48)

The Islamic feminist Asma Barlas says that the text of the Qur'an is persistently "de-contextualized and re-contextualized in light of Muslim sexual politics" (18), and claims that "I derive my understanding of equality and of patriarchy from the Qur'an, not from any feminist text" (16). A study of the Qur'an ensures that the text has acknowledged all the social rights of women—right to get knowledge, right to choose her husband, maternal and matrimonial rights, right to find out employment, ethical rights, and economic rights, religious and political rights. Even academicians like Fatima Umar Naseef and Etim E. Okon opine that Islam provides with more liberation to women than any other religion including Christianity because whereas it is acknowledged in the Bible that Eve persuades Adam to commit the original sin, the Qur'an denies it by declaring that both Adam and Eve have been responsible for consuming the fruits of the forbidden tree being instigated by Satan<sup>3</sup>, thereby giving women an escape from the allegation (Naseef 56; Okon 25).

Durrani puts numerous instances to show how the patriarchy that always refers to the verses of the Qur'an, carefully disregards some of the verses which can, they fear, pose a threat to their discourse. Wife beating or domestic violence is not permissible in the Qur'anic inscriptions which rather focus on the duties and responsibilities that a husband should perform towards his wife<sup>4</sup>. The Qur'an allows hitting wife as the ultimate means of punishment but even there lies certain limitations. In the footnote of the Oxford edition of the Qur'an (translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem), it denotes "a single slap" (54). But the physical assault and other sorts of domestic violence that Durrani and other women suffer in the Khar household clearly exhibit the wilful and conscious refusal of the patriarchy to accept the actual interpretations of the Qur'an. It defends the rights of a woman by denying man any sort of illegal sexual intercourse outside marriage as it says, "Other women are lawful to you, so long as you seek them in marriage, with gifts from your property, looking for wedlock rather than *fornication*" (The Qur'an 53; emphasis added). Mustafa Khar, the feudal lord, commits the incestuous sin of extramarital affair with Adila, the young sister of his wife, Tehmina Durrani, and many other women. The narrator is shocked to declare that Mustafa has been "highly selective" (213) in his reference to the Qur'anic inscriptions. She further assures that the feudal lords like Mustafa enjoy "the authority to justify their every deed on the basis of their own, quite convenient, interpretation of the Koran" (41). Even though the Islamic feminists concentrate on the verses of the Qur'an in order to defend the rights and privileges of women, the academicians like Etim E. Okon question plural marriage or the custom of polygamy mentioned in the Qur'an. Even though the verse dictates maintaining equality in a man's treatment towards all of his wives, it is nonetheless impossible. It cannot



be denied that polygamy is another mechanism that is employed by patriarchy so as to marginalize women. In Islam, therefore, “gender justice and equality is *partially endorsed* based on some of the prescriptions of the holy Qur’an and the Hadith of the Prophet” (Okon 23; emphasis added).

### **Performance and Survival Strategy**

What differentiates Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* from other marginal texts is that here the narrative not only speaks about a woman at the verge of the society, but it also describes her vehement resistance against the discourse of the patriarchy, thereby throwing away the stigma of the other or the marginalized. The importance of Durrani’s autobiography is that her story gives voice to the voiceless section of the Pakistani society. She realizes that the patriarchy will dominate her until and unless she smashes its bedrock into fragments. She concludes that in order to accomplish her task, she should “expose the camouflage” (375).

She realizes that the role of a submissive wife that she plays in the cult of domesticity gradually extracts her vigour and strength, and consequently it discards her like chaff. She discerns that she has to change her attitude and her outlook. She believes that she should apply certain modes of retribution in order to survive amidst barbaric circumstances. In order to demolish the heinous and hideous social hierarchy, her mind begins to fabricate a counterattack. From a meek and docile housewife, she appears as a resistant and unyielding warrior who engages herself in a conflict against the vicious and nefarious forces of the patriarchy that have persistently subdued and subjugated her. Contrasted with the hegemonizing perception of the status of Muslim women in the family and their obligations towards their husband, Durrani declares her position in the life of Mustafa. Her standpoint is clear when she announces:

‘Mustafa, I’ve taken enough’, I said. ‘There’s no reason for me to take any more. This is *a voluntary relationship, a relationship of choice*. I’m not your sister or your mother. I’m your wife. I’m not bound to you by ties of blood. We have a contract to live together. I can tear that up whenever I feel like it. Get that into your head. Learn to respect me and appreciate my living with you. I find no necessity at all to live in this concentration camp. You correct your ways and make our lives worth living— or I’m leaving. (188-189; emphasis added)

What captivates us is that her voice has certain “power and conviction” (188) whenever she assures her social status that is fully contrasted with the position of a woman in a traditional Muslim society where a woman does not have a room of her own.

She knows that she can put an end to domestic violence of Mustafa by attacking him physically. To quote Durrani:

I kicked him in the belly with both feet, sending him reeling from the bed. He attacked once more and I searched and shoved him as hard as I could. I clawed at his face and pulled his hair. No woman had dared do this to Mustafa Khar....I stared at him with sheer contempt, and I could tell that he was confused and even frightened by my resistance. (189-190)

Even though her temerity and audacity has been challenged by Mustafa by carrying on his mechanism of domestic violence, he fails to stifle her voice. Resistance against the conventional patriarchal set up appears to be the sole appliance of survival strategy for Durrani. Regarding Mustafa's incestuous relationship with her sister, Adila, she makes a biting satire of his deviation from the track of morality, as she sharply announces— "Your marriage, according to the Koran, was over years ago when you slept with my sister" (362). The counterstroke of Durrani threatens the rule of patriarchy and at the same time, it predicts that the hierarchical superiority of Mustafa as a man is at risk. Contrasted with his other submissive wives, it is Durrani who declares war against her tyrannical husband— an attempt to withdraw the operations of power over Islamic womanhood.

### **From Margin to the Centre: (Re)construction of Identity**

In the final part of the book, Durrani narrates her journey from a subordinate and submissive wife to a dominant and commanding personage as she plays a crucial as well as an influential part in the Pakistani politics that is mainly controlled by the males. During the political internment of Mustafa Khar, the narrator represents her husband before the Pakistani folks and gradually becomes one of the leading figures in the Pakistani politics. For the first time in her life, she comes out of the veil and begins to believe in her own capability as she herself declares in her autobiography, "After all these years of marriage, I was no longer Mustafa's programmed robot; I was a thinking person *capable of independent actions*" (316; emphasis added). Even though she supports Mustafa from the political point of view, she refuses to allow Mustafa exercise his control over her. She expresses her popularity among the common folks especially among the young generation that has "a collective crush" (325) upon her. Involvement in politics helps her to rediscover herself. She acquires the title of "lioness" (327), which is less a denomination and more a marker of identity, the achievement of a social status that a woman can cherish throughout her life.

The most disturbing trait that Durrani exhibits is that in a Pakistani Muslim community, a woman has no home in the real sense. For her, home is just a physical entity. But finally she divorces Mustafa and even denies his surname, which is nonetheless a drastic



step undertaken by a Pakistani woman. She constructs her home where she successfully finds out homeliness. She welcomes her children at her own home which is free from all sorts of constraint and obligation of the organized religion. After the publication of her autobiography, her father disowns her publicly, people accuse her of adultery, two criminal charges have been issued against her and last but not the least, Mustafa Khar, her former husband, intends to silence her voice again. Even though Durrani realizes that she has become alone, she refuses to accept the stigma of marginality anymore; instead, she concludes that the step that she has undertaken helps her surpass the attempts which “are made to pulverize any female voice against ideological society” (Thakur 433). She firmly announces, “Well Mustafa, now the world will soon know you only as Tehmina Durrani’s ex-husband” (382). Thus she assures that the identity of a Pakistani woman does not always depend upon her husband; the opposite, too, can happen because a Pakistani woman can construct her own identity by which her spouse can be recognised before the world.

### **Conclusion**

It is interesting enough to argue that what the Islamic feminists theorise, Tehmina Durrani turns those theoretical perceptions into practice. Her voice reiterates the words of those scholars of Islamic feminism who “underscore that violence against women is indeed anti-Islamic” (Badran 249). As Durrani’s autobiography divulges a variety of mechanisms which are imposed upon Pakistani women to keep them at the edge of the society, at the same time, it recounts the story of the female narrator who is capable of withstanding the power of men and discarding the status of other, thereby enjoying the taste of freedom, liberty and equality. It can be justifiably said that it is Durrani’s autobiography that destabilizes the authoritative and intimidating establishment of patriarchy.

### **Notes:**

1. The term “Islamic Feminism” mainly emerged in the 1990s in order to argue the position of women in the Islamic societies. They concentrate on the *Quran* and provide us with anti-patriarchal interpretation of the holy text. But at the same time, the Islamic feminists like Asma Barlas and Margot Badran refuse to consider them as feminists because they think that feminism is a theory popularized by the western academicians who fail to focus on the particular interests of the non-white or black women. According to these scholars, feminism in its course of analysis fails to pay equal attention to the issues of women of colour. In her conference article “Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincialising Feminism as a Master Narrative” (I have already focussed on Barlas and her article in this paper), considers feminism as a master-narrative or metanarrative that supersedes the concerns of non-white

women. In this article, Barlas differentiates herself from feminism and shows her preference for the term “believing woman” (Barlas 16) as her identity.

2. In Islam, *khula* is a mechanism through which a Muslim woman has been given the right to divorce her husband provided that she will give back the dowry that she obtained from her husband during marriage.

3. Contrary to the biblical concept, it is said in the Qur’an — “Satan whispered to them [Adam and Eve] so as to expose their nakedness which had been hidden from them: he said, ‘Your lord only forbade you this tree to prevent you becoming angels or immortals’, and he swore to them, ‘I am giving you sincere advice’— he lured them with lies. Their nakedness became exposed to them when they had eaten from the tree: they began to put together leaves from the Garden to cover themselves” (The Qur’an, 95). In the verses of the Qur’an, thus, nowhere any sort of allegation has been registered against Eve concerning the original sin.

4. The Qur’an has prescribed certain norms concerning the demeanour of a man towards his wife as it has been said, “Husband should take good care of their wives, with the bounties God has given to some more than others and with what they spend out of their money....if you fear high-handedness from your wives, remind them of the teachings of God, then ignore them in bed, then hit them. If they obey you, you have no right to act against them. (The Qur’an, 54)

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