

## **Patriarchy and Muslim Women: A Study of Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord***

**Dr. Mirza Sadaf Fatima**

Independent Researcher

Ph. D from Jamia Millia Islamia and NET & SET.

### **Abstract**

Muslim Women are assumed to be oppressed. This paper aims to look at patriarchy and its role in oppressing women. The paper will study Tehmina Durrani's memoir *My Feudal Lord* and look at patriarchy and Muslim women through this work. The relationship between power and patriarchy is looked at. The intermingling of religion and culture will be looked at. The study will also look at the role of autobiography in the representation of women. The paper will also talk about Gender hegemony.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Feminism, Islamic Feminism, Muslimah, Oppression, Violence.

*My Feudal Lord* is an autobiographical work by Tehmina Durrani, with William and Marilyn Hoffer. The memoir was her first work and was published in 1991. It was an account of her lived experience as the wife of a feudal lord, who was an abusive husband. Tehmina Durrani is a Pakistani author and activist who has worked primarily for women and children. Her gamut of works includes her memoir, *My Feudal Lord* (1991), *A Mirror to the Blind* (1996), *Blasphemy* (1998) and *Happy Things in Sorrow Times* (1998). She is also a social activist and a painter. The dominant themes of her works are woman and child-centric, ranging from domestic violence to distortion of Islam and Islamic values, and the hypocrisy of religious figures.

Tehmina Durrani's debut work, *My Feudal Lord*, was a sensational piece of work and caused

upheaval in Pakistani society. It was a book that brought the writer both fame and shame. She was aware of the repercussions of writing this book, for which her own family disowned her for thirteen years. But she persisted and has emerged today as one of the strongest voices coming from Pakistan, for women's and children's rights. Her philanthropy and social activism have given her an identity of her own. The memoir has become a bestseller, with translations into over thirty-nine languages. However, soon after its publication it was considered a highly controversial work and banned in Pakistan for a long time since it talked about issues that highly traditional and patriarchal societies like Pakistan consider taboo. It was a book ahead of its time for a patriarchal society to accept. Here, Durrani talks about women's rights and the misuse of religion. For a patriarchal society, the book seemed to be blasphemy and a betrayal of their cultural values. This, however, is not true when the work is analyzed in-depth. The main focus of the book is marriage and family relationships; the few mentions of religion are brief and not meant to question the Islamic belief system.

*My Feudal Lord* is primarily an expose of her politically powerful but abusive husband, Malik Ghulam Mustafa Khar. He is the 'feudal lord' mentioned in the title. Born in 1937, Mustafa Khar was a Pakistani politician and landlord, who had been an active member of the political scene of his country since 1962. He had been a close aide of the former Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and one of the founder members of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). He had been the Governor of the Punjab Province, Pakistan, from December 1971 to November 1973, and the Chief Minister of the same province from November 1973 to March 1974.

Tehmina Durrani was Mustafa Khar's sixth wife, who filed for divorce after fourteen years of abusive marriage. Her memoir describes his personal life in detail. By all accounts, he was a much married man. While going through the history of Mustafa Khar's multiple marriages and divorces, one can see a pattern emerge. According to Tehmina, Mustafa always acted compulsively, in matters of marriage and divorce. He was not traumatized by his many failed marriages. He seemed to move on from one wife to another with hardly a second thought. This kind of behaviour speaks volumes about his attitude to women, whom he seemed to view as mere possessions.

Here, Mustafa Khar's personality may be seen as a reflection of the male-dominant Pakistani society that he came from. He was one of the prominent members of the zamindari nizam system that had prevailed over many parts of South Asia for centuries. This system gave absolute power to feudal lords not just over their land but also over the peasants and the women living in their spheres of power. After its Independence in 1947, India managed to eradicate the feudal system through land reforms, but Pakistan continued to be ruled by these feudal lords. In the Author's Note to this book, Tehmina Durrani has consciously interwoven her own history with that of the nation. She claims that by writing this memoir, she is aiming for the "greater good" of Pakistan. She expresses the hope that her nation will understand the shortcomings of the feudal system after reading her book.

Pakistan has a rich history of cultures and traditions. As part of South Asia, Pakistan shares strong roots with the cultures of India and Bangladesh. In Durrani's work also, we see the intermingling of cultures at several points of the narrative. For example, in the matter of dress, Tehmina often describes the women of Pakistan wearing the sari, but there is no explicit mention of the hijab. Hence, the stereotype of the veiled Muslim woman is hardly visible in the elite Muslim society of *My Feudal Lord*.

Feudalism in Pakistan has been around since its inception, but due to the lack of land reforms, it still survives there, unlike India. In Pakistan, both the economy and politics have strong ties to the feudal lords. It would not be wrong to say that the country has a 'feudal occupied Parliament'. According to some sources, most of the people belonging to powerful feudal families in Pakistan have held political offices either as ministers, MLA's or MNA's.

*My Feudal Lord* begins with a self-righteous Author's Note where she justifies her motives for writing this book; she talks about being aware of the consequences of writing about her personal life and gives her reasons for going ahead with it. She says that the book deconstructs the fantasy surrounding the feudal lord, the 'Prince Charming' of young women's dreams. Durrani believes it is important for Pakistan and its growth to overcome the feudal system. She claims that her memoir is aimed at the—greater good of Pakistan.

The Author's Note is followed by the Dedication. Here, she dedicates the book to the people of Pakistan with these words:

—I dedicate this book:

To the people of Pakistan, who have repeatedly trusted and supported their leaders – leaders who have, in return, used the hungry, oppressed, miserable multitudes to further their personal interests. I want the people of my country to know the truth behind the rhetoric, so they may learn to look beyond the façade.¶ (07)

She has also dedicated it to the five ex-wives of Mustafa Khar, to her children, to her grandmother and finally, to her tyrannical ex-husband. To him, she aims it as a mirror so that he may see his own reflection in its pages. This Dedication by the author plays an important role since it helps set the tone of the narrative; it also gives an indication of her intention and purpose.

Tehmina Durrani's main argument in this work is that powerful men, like Mustafa Khar, derive their power from a distorted version of Islam that is supported by the silence of women and society as a whole. Religion plays an important role in our lives. And people in power use it as a tool to rule over the common masses, of which women form a large part. They sell cultural practices and patriarchy in the name of religion, and women accept it in silence, believing it is to be the command of religion. There are certain instances in the book that brings to light the selective use of Islam by Mustafa Khar. He uses it for his convenience and disregards it when it doesn't suit his purpose. His feudal upbringing gives him the license to do so.

“In the areas that were later to become Pakistan some feudal families utilized Islam as a weapon of control. The patriarchs were venerated as holy men, who spoke with Allah. And, indeed, at some early times, many were pious and righteous. But gradually power passed to elder sons who were neither pious nor particularly moral, yet were revered by the people of the area and perceived as ‘envoys of Allah’. They had the authority to justify their every deed on the basis of their own, quite convenient, interpretation of the Koran. A feudal lord was an absolute ruler who could justify any action.”(41)

There are several such instances where he uses Islam as a means to an end. He often swears and makes promises on the Quran but does not think twice before breaking that promise.

—In Mecca, Mustafa placed his hand on the Kaaba, the house of Allah, and swore that he would never look at another woman in his entire life. For a Muslim, there is no greater testament.“(121)

After its publication, *My Feudal Lord* becomes a best-seller and the writer wins acclaim for her sensational memoir, though it is probable there was some politics at play to make this work extremely popular in the European market. Interestingly, it was banned in Pakistan soon after its publication. A point worth noting is that the blurb and the cover page hint at the story of an oppressed Muslim woman. This is problematic since it sets the tone for the reader before he/she even begins reading. Quotes such as ‘...women caught in the complex web of Muslim society (on the blurb) or the words, ‘A Devastating Indictment of Women’s Role in Muslim Society’ (on the cover page) create pre-conceived notions about the work in the reader’s mind.

The unique autobiography belongs to a genre called “abuse narrative” which is not exclusive to Muslim society. It is similar to the “misery memoir”, a genre that started in America and was defined as a literary work that talked about trauma, hardship or abuse, and was usually autobiographical. Some popular writers of misery memoirs are Dave Pelzer, Scott Nelson and Frank McCourt. ( Multiple sources Goodreads etc) However, while the works of these Western writers are seen as the individual’s struggles against injustice or abuse, the works of Muslim women are seen either as propaganda or as slander. Such Muslim women’s narratives are also seen as representing an entire community or faith group. From within the community, they are seen as enforcing the ‘Orientalist’ agenda of the West. Hence, instead of being judged on their literary merit, these works are judged on external factors. In the case of Tehmina Durrani also, her memoir was seen as representing Muslim women and Muslim society. Hence, her individual struggle as a woman became lost and subsumed within the collective identity of her community.

If looked at without any of these prisms, we see a work that talks about gender hegemony, socio-

cultural patriarchy and domestic violence. It is about a woman who can be from any culture or community. The protagonist is a victim of domestic abuse, who overcomes her ordeal and shows courage to break free. Durrani's story is gripping in itself and does not need the lens of religion. This book can be read without being aware of the religious angle, and it will still have an impact. The character of Tehmina does not adhere to the stereotypical image of the Muslim woman, as we have been discussing in the previous chapter. Her story is 'an extraordinary story' as the *Sunday Times* has called it, without the politics of categorizing.

In *My Feudal Lord*, the autobiography becomes Tehmina Durrani's vehicle for carrying her story to the world. A personal narrative, like an autobiography, is usually understood as an expression of an exceptional life or as the history of a great and famous personality. Women have adopted this genre that consists of numerous forms, like the memoir and life history, to talk about their lives, societies and cultures. They serve as a record of their experiences and also express their resistance.

Such women-centric narratives introduce a different perspective from the dominant narratives. According to Amina Yaqin in her article —Autobiography and Muslim Women's Lives", memoirs like Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* challenge stereotypical notions of women's identity in a Muslim state. These works, consciously or unconsciously, comment on the stereotypical image of Muslim women and work towards deconstructing these preconceived notions. These poignant accounts of women's personal histories also help us to observe the diversity in the lived experiences of Muslim women. They give the writers a chance to introspect. Writing about one's life and being realistic is a challenge, especially in a genre like autobiography, which is multi-dimensional and has a wide scope.

In her article, "Autobiography as Testimony: Truth and Fiction in Tehmina Durrani's Writings", Soumita Adhikary calls the autobiography a representation of the self, in the written form. Dr K. Sandhya, in her article titled "Tehmina Durrani's Blasphemy from a Multiple Perspective", says that the book, *My Feudal Lord*, should be seen as a milestone for the cause of Pakistani women. Once women try new techniques, they challenge stereotypes that claim women can only write in a typical style or genre. Stereotypes in literature are not an alien concept. These preconceived

notions about women and their works are problematic, and women writers across the globe are pointing out the bias they have to face in the publishing industry. The absence of women from publishing houses, literary prizes and certain genres like thrillers and fiction, is seen as a gender bias that is deep-rooted in power politics aimed at maintaining the status quo.

In 2015, Kamila Shamsie published an article in *The Guardian*, titled “Let’s have a year of publishing only women – a provocation”. In this article, she challenged publishing houses to publish only women writers in 2018 and talked about the imbalance between male and female writers. She wrote:

“Several years ago, Martin Amis chaired a literary festival panel on —The Crisis of American Fictionl with Richard Ford, Jay McInerney and Junot Díaz. I was in the audience, and halfway through the discussion leaned over to the person sitting next to me and said: “Clearly the crisis of American fiction is that there are no women in it”. It’s not just that there weren’t any women on the stage. In the entire discussion, which lasted nearly an hour, there was no mention of Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson, Annie Proulx, Anne Tyler, Donna Tartt, Jhumpa Lahiri or any other contemporary female writer. A single reference to Eudora Welty was the only acknowledgement that women in the US have ever had anything to do with the world of letters.” (*The Guardian*, 5 June 2015)

Women give their perspectives in their personal narratives like memoirs and autobiographies. Women who write about themselves also write about their society and culture. In the process, they present their version of the ‘self’. An autobiography has elements of both personal and public life from the author’s perspective. It is an opportunity to reflect. Reena Mitra, in her 2005 book, *Critical Responses to English Literature*, claims that autobiography is the conversion of experience into a narrative:

“The autobiographical process is the recreation of the author’s personality, which is seen in retrospect. This artistic activity helps the autobiographer in determining his true

identity and enables him to etch out an accurate picture of himself. The self-referentiality of autobiography is also self-interrogative and thus, a work beginning in self-depiction ends in a deeper knowledge of the self.” (Mitra,150)

*My Feudal Lord* also shatters the stereotypes like oppression, backwardness, lack of agency, lack of education and brainwashing generally associated with Muslim women. The protagonist is nothing like the Muslim woman created by these stereotypes since she has agency and succeeds in challenging socio-cultural norms and patriarchy in her work. Autobiography as a genre provides her the space to challenge and resist. This bears out what Amina Yaqin says in her article, “Autobiography and Muslim Women’s Lives”:

“In literary study and history, generally, autobiography is recognized as one of the most self-conscious genres which interrogate the historicization of the female subject in reformist and nationalist fiction. The questions that need to be asked of these autobiographies are deeply imbricated with ideas of a historical self, community, gender, and sexual difference” (Amina Yaqin,4).

Najia Zaidi and Misbah Qureshi, in their paper, “Autobiography and Women Empowerment”, talk about the close relationship between culture and violence with reference to Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord*. Commenting on Durrani’s purpose in writing this work, they say:

“Her purpose is two-fold. First, to expose the corrupt politicians who betray the country and the people and second, depicting the crippling status of womanhood in Pakistani society. The focus of her autobiography is the institution of marriage and family which are thoroughly embedded in cultural practices.” (Zaidi & Qureshi, 5)

It is important to locate the root cause of this growing gender disparity, and coming from within the culture, the voices of Muslim women are indigenous and present a first-hand opinion. Tehmina Durrani’s work is one of the few from Pakistan that talks about Muslim woman-friendly feminism. Zaidi and Qureshi also talk about how women in South Asian communities, have strong ties with their cultures, traditions and customs, which hinder their personal growth. Another major factor is ignorance of their rights, both constitutional as well as religious.



Women are unaware of their rights, and this ignorance leads to suppression.

Gayatri C. Spivak stresses on the role of literature in the production of cultural representation (Spivak, 269). Durrani uses this medium to speak about her personal history and experiences. This is a common trend across women's writings. A woman writer uses language/literature to deconstruct the image of the self as the 'other'.

Besides being a writer, Tehmina Durrani also became a social activist. She was one of the first women from Pakistan who combined ardent belief in Islam with a demand for women's rights. She started a movement in 2001 called Ana Hadjra Labaek. She believed in Islam as an egalitarian religion and said:

"In 2001, I launched The Movement, Ana Hadjra Labaek, at the Future Show 3010 in Bologna Italy. Indeed, at that time it was futuristic to believe that women empowered with an Islamic symbol as proof of their Islamic rights, could move towards a peaceful transition to Islam's ORIGINAL INTENTION through Ijtihad." (Tehmina Durrani Foundation)

Patriarchy has no religion or caste; male domination comes with the subjugation of women in all cultures and societies. In this autobiography, it is evident at multiple levels. Khar assumes that he owns most of the women in his life. He exercises tyrannical control not only over his wife, but also over other women like his slave, Dai Ayesha, and even his daughters. Gender hegemony is inculcated in him through the society he is born into. It is part of his personality and it gives him power in his personal space, even when he is in exile or in prison. However, it is important to note that Tehmina also consents to his domination. This is explained by Shabina Nishat Omar who, in her article, "Novelising the Autobiography: Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*", sees Tehmina's consent as being imprinted on women's minds through their environment and upbringing. She says:

"Her endurance of Mustafa's tortures is the result of an archaic patriarchal value which

inculcates a sense of slavery into an essence of womanhood. This extends to sexual domination of the wife by the husband. Patriarchal discourse does not regard sex as a means of mutual physical enjoyment but rather as a tool of domination.” (Omar, 177)

Dai Ayesha, who works for them, is a slave of Mustafa Khar. The wife is beaten into subservience but the condition of the slave girl is even worse since she is someone with no identity or rights. She is a part of the landscape, she lives with the family, served as Mustafa’s eyes and ears, and —other than a small portion of wheat to her family, gets nothing in return. Dai Ayesha is not even paid the minimum wage for her service to the family. She does as the master directs and has no connection with her own family. While the feudal wife, Tehmina, manages to break the silence and leave her husband after fourteen years, for Dai Ayesha, freedom would come only with death.

Dai Ayesha’s situation highlights the violation of basic human rights. Human rights may be defined as basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled. Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) claims all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. We usually take our human rights for granted but in the case of Dai Ayesha, we find a situation where no human rights exist; she is reduced to a slave of the feudal system, of patriarchy and of Mustafa Khar. She is dehumanised and enslaved. Women’s rights include the right to free and just existence, education, ownership of property, freedom of choice, and freedom to resist slavery and violence. In the case of Khar’s wife in the memoir, these basic rights are mutated as per culture but in the case of Dai Ayesha, all rights are denied.

The case of Dai Ayesha also brings to light Mustafa’s deceptive nature and double standards. Ayesha was a married woman from a lower class who had been punished because she fell in love with a man who was already married. Labelled ‘characterless’ by her husband, she had been handed over to Mustafa, the feudal lord, to be punished for adultery. He had done this by making her a slave in his own household. Yet, Mustafa would also propose marriage to Tehmina while she was another man’s wife. He would make her divorce her first husband and come to him. He

would then go on to use it against her. Referring to this, Tehmina says, “He continued to use my first marriage as a stick to beat me with; my divorce and remarriage had proved to him that I was capable of adultery” (106).

Mustafa Khar is a product of the feudal society of Pakistan. Gender hegemony and masculine superiority are a part of his upbringing. *My Feudal Lord* provides an insight into the position of women in a male-dominated society. It is generally known that society has a role to play in making people what they are; this is also the case with Mustafa Khar. Society makes him an autocrat who demands complete obedience from people around him, especially women, be it his mother, wife, daughter or servants. “He demanded obedience, even from his one-year-old daughter.” (142). Society and culture place him in a superior position while all the women are reduced to a lower position and owe him obedience. Khar manages to maintain this power structure by using religion as a tool. Tehmina says:

“I could only develop in the direction that he chose. To think independently was a crime that he had the right to punish. Many of his beliefs ran counter to everything that I considered right, but there was no way that I could dare to engage him in a rational debate. His values were steeped in a medieval milieu, a mix of prejudices, superstitions and old wives’ tales. High on the list was the role of the wife. According to feudal tradition, a wife was honour-bound to live her life according to her husband’s whims. A woman was like a man’s land— ‘The Koran says so,’ he said. This was a revealing simile. A feudal lord loves his land only in functional terms. He encloses it and protects it. If it is barren, he neglects it. Land is power, prestige and property. I interpreted the Koran differently. To me, land has to be tended and cultivated; only then could it produce in abundance. Otherwise, it would be barren. But, of course, I was expected to accept Mustafa’s interpretation without question” (107).

Gender hegemony and patriarchy are not specific to any region or religion. The situation is faced by women across cultures. In the case of India and Pakistan, gendered violence is not specific to any religion. It is more of a cultural issue. Rajesh Gill, in his anthology, *Gender, Patriarchy and Violence*, traces this phenomenon across the Indian states of Punjab and

Haryana. He says:

“After almost 50 years of a successful Green Revolution, these states stand today as the epitome of gender inequality and patriarchy, with a cultural fixation on honour, often culminating into diverse forms of violence against women, both within as well as outside the home” (Gill,1).

The problem is cultural and needs to be tackled accordingly. Further complications arise when culture and religion are merged. It gets difficult to separate one from the other. S.P. Shree also talks about this phenomenon and says: “This behaviour is universal and not restricted to Pakistan only.” (Shree, 121) It is important to separate religion from culture because religion becomes a tool which is used against women, to maintain domination. The cry to reclaim religion for themselves is not a new concept. Many Muslim women activists like Amina Wudud and Riffat Hassan believe that change can only come from within when Muslim women re-claim and re-interpret the Quran for themselves. The inequality that Muslim women face is a result of cultural practices rather than Islam. Riffat Hassan, the renowned Pakistani-American theologian, even calls the Quran the “Magna-Carta of human rights” in her 2009 article, published in the online magazine Islamicity.

A befitting reply to patriarchy that oppresses women can come from the women themselves, raising their voices and putting their own arguments forward. Education and knowledge can empower women and help them raise their voices against the injustices and inequality they face.

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