

## Unveiling the Legacy of Resistance and Reconstruction: Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* as a saga of Struggle and Survival

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### Abstract

This paper aims to trace the legacy of resistance in Feminist literature with a special focus on Tesmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*. Feminist literature pinpoints the universality and plurality of gender violence and plays a pivotal role in establishing female identity in a male chauvinistic world by voicing against the age old patriarchal discrimination in zillion ways. Through *My Feudal Lord*, Durrani also voices the continuum of the resistance in Feminist literature from time immemorial. In *My Feudal Lord*, Durrani shackles the stereotyped gender roles and epitomises her own life as a saga of struggle and survival.

Tesmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*, is a sensational exposure, strip teasing the hypocrisy of her politically renowned husband, Mustafa Khar who is a sociopath. The title of the book is very apt and suggestive as the whole book revolves around the feudal lord Mustafa Khar and how his wives are physically and emotionally abused and silenced in a patriarchal Muslim society. As the title suggests, the novel exposes the hypocrisy of the Pakistani "Mullah feudal lords" and their power domination and arrogance. The novel throws ample light on the pathetic plight of the women caught in the complex web of Muslim feudal society.

**Keywords:** Feminist Literature, Gender, Hegemony, Domestic Violence, Resistance and Women Empowerment

Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* as a text of feminist canon, critiques the injustice and gender hegemony prevailing in a conservative Pakistani society and as an autobiography showcases the indomitable spirit and fortitude of herself as a woman in establishing her own identity in a male chauvinistic world. Durrani was brutally ostracized and disowned by her family on both the paternal and maternal sides and denied the custody of her five children for thirteen years after the publication of *My Feudal Lord*, as she disclosed in the Preface of the book, "When I decided to write this book, I was more than aware of the many perils of exposing my private life to a male-dominated Muslim society with crushing conservative sensibilities"

Though the book gained much momentum, no publisher was willing to take the liability of such a controversial book. As narrated in the Preface, she initially printed it herself, and later published by Vanguard books when it gained attention. *My Feudal Lord* has been translated into 40 languages and has bagged several awards. Durrani penned several books like "Happy Things in Sorrow Times" portraying the incessant struggle of an Afghan girl Rabia spanning from childhood to youth and another novel Blasphemy voicing the issues of domestic violence.

*My Feudal Lord*, as an autobiography of Durrani, sojourns through her pathetic life as the wife of the famous political figure of Pakistan Ghulam Mustafa Khar who is renowned as the “Lion of Punjab” and her inspiring transformation after meeting Edhi to a social worker establishing the “Tehmina Durrani Foundation”. *My Feudal Lord* is a true account of the pathetic plight and her endless struggles of herself as the sixth wife of Mustafa Khar, the feudal lord. The book is not just the story of a single woman, but the protagonist becomes the mouthpiece of all Pakistani Muslim women who are the victims of the traditional, age old patriarchal domination and who are subjugated and silenced to physical and emotional abuse. Durrani's struggle was daringly bold, as it's not simply against the patriarchy but against the politically powerful Feudal lord as she portrays, “A feudal lord was an absolute ruler who could justify any action” (41). Durrani strips the very concept of feudal lord and questions the aura of power bestowed on them in the author's note it when she says:

There is a fantasy of a feudal lord as exotic, tall, dark and handsome man, with flashing eyes and traces of quick-tempered gypsy blood. Images of him parrying thrusts with the fiercest of swordsmen and riding off into the sunset on his black steed set the pubescent heart aflutter. He is seen as a passionate ladies' man and something of a rough diamond, the archetypal male chauvinist who forces a woman to love him despite his treatment of her. But the fantasy is far from reality, and my country of Pakistan must face up to reality if it is ever to grow and prosper. (7).

Durrani with an indomitable spirit evokes and questions the consciousness of the conservative society for its deliberate silence towards the atrocities against its women in the author's note of *My Feudal Lord* as:

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 that they might learn to look beyond the facade. (7).

Durrani dedicates this book to Mustafa Khar and offers it as an eye opener for the feudal lord who exhorts his role in making and breaking her as a woman. The book mirrors saga of her suffering as the sixth wife of Mustafa Khar:

To Mustafa Khar himself. I wish that this book might serve as a mirror, so that he may see in it reflections of the man, the husband, the father, the leader and the friend he is. To my beloved children, who, in our closed society, shall have to suffer the trials of a family exposed. I trust that this book will help them muster strength and courage to face continuing trauma. I want them to reject wrong and endorse right. I hope and pray that their values may be based on true Islamic principles, rather than a distorted, self-serving interpretation. May their love and respect for their motherland cause them to reject any compromise. May my sons never oppress the weak; may my daughters learn to fight oppression. Finally, to my grandmother. No-one could have understood my story better. May her soul, wherever it may be, know that I survived (8).

Durrani was shockingly discouraged by her conservative parents, when she gathered courage for a divorce. She portrayed herself as a victim and the representative of the subjugated and silenced women in the conventional Pakistani feudal Muslim society. The third part “Lioness” as the title suggests showcases Durrani as a woman realizing her own vigour and

vitality while campaigning in the country for Mustafa while he is jailed for political reasons.

Durrani is reluctant to opt for a divorce initially as her mother warns her to keep her second marriage intact, as she says, “This is your second marriage and I don't want you, for any reason at all, to leave him. You only leave his home in a coffin. This is the point on which I take you back into the family” (129). Durrani was denied the right to be with her children and Khar derived sadistic pleasure by kidnapping his children as she states that “there was no other equivalent pain” (121). She was fully aware of the gravity and social impact of a divorce in a conservative society as :

I knew that I could not leave him. I had entered into a controversial marriage, and I had to strive to keep it intact. I recognized that there was always an effort and a price to pay for success; I must not fail at any cost. A lasting and happy marriage was my only value. Under its respectable shroud, alongside my powerful husband, my mother would not be able to shun me, and the fear of that happening became equal to – or even greater than – my fear of him. The two fears kept me shaken and traumatized. I did not have the confidence to walk away. I reasoned that Khar would hunt me down , and find me, no matter how far I run. Then he would murder me. I was convinced of it. (108-109).

When the novel progresses, Durrani establishes her identity by opting for “Kuhla”, the right of divorce granted to a woman by Islamic law when she agrees to rescind part or all of her property claims. Durrani, after divorcing Khar wrote her autobiography exposing his split identity as a towering public figure and as a sociopath. The book unveils the restriction imposed by the feudal Muslim society on women and the code of conduct for being respectable and modest as she narrates,

... that in the interior regions of Sindh, respectable women cover their faces with a chader, leaving only the eyes and brow visible” (283). Durrani pinpoints an incident in the novel when she was blatantly penalized for not preserving her modesty when she visited her husband without a dupatta in the prison and she receives pungent criticism for forgetting a very basic thing which represents her “sharam”(shame) and her “haya “(feminine modesty)”.

The ultimate goal of a Pakistani woman is to marry and to be trained to distance themselves from men and to tame themselves with the world of don'ts as she says, “Never wear makeup or nail polish. Do not look at boys. Avoid modern girlfriends and avoid any girl who has an older brother. Never visit a friend without special permission and without your nanny. Never pick up the telephone. Never go out alone with the driver” (189).

Durrani exposes the deep servility instilled in the mind of the Pakistani women about marriage which was an irrevocable snare for them as she says, “If a husband turned out to be a brute, it was the wife's duty to persevere until she changed his character. A broken marriage was a reflection of a woman's failure” (29). Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* is a pungent criticism on the very conventional notions of marriage as Julia Roberts rightly comments that Women, you are not rehabilitation centers for badly raised men and it's not their job to fix them, change him, parent or raise him, and they want a partner and not a project.

Durrani laments about the pathetic plight of women who are raised by the patriarchy unable to establish their identity or the real essence in them when she says that “raised as a schizophrenic; an appearance of perfection was more important than genuine feelings. There was

no question of discovering oneself. Identity and individuality were crushed. Personality failed to develop” (29-30). There is always the other in the male dominated world and can never be equal for men as Tennyson reflects the same sentiment in his poem ‘The Princess’:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:

Man for the sword and for the needle she:

Man with the head and woman with the heart:

Man to command and woman to obey;

All else confusion. (Canto V, lines 437-441)

The echoes of the incessant struggle of the female protagonists crossing the borders of time and place are explicit in feminist literature in zillion ways. Salma’s novel, *The Hour Past Midnight* also exposes the pathetic plight of Muslim women in traditional South Indian families. Salma delineated Rabia, the protagonist who is caught sneaking off to see a movie with friends and is brutally punished by her mother for her disobedience. Through *The Hour Past Midnight*, Salma unveils the pathetic plight of a woman entangled in a closely-knit web of a community and the protagonist trying to survive in the patriarchal terrain through her fortitude. Salma delineated it in detail when she says:

In *The Hour Past Midnight*, women are not sent to school after adolescence, married in their teens against their wishes and relegated to spend the rest of their lives in the kitchen and tending to the children and family. Ignoring this rule would invite the delinquent label (19).

The legacy of resistance in Feminist works pinpoints universality of patriarchal domination irrespective of castes and borders. Manusmriti is an evidence for the age old women suppression practiced in the patriarchal society, when it instructs women as “Manusmriti preaches that as a girl, she should obey and seek protection of her father, as a young woman her husband, and as a widow her son; and that a woman should always worship her husband as a god.” (Chapter 5, Shlokas 148, 149). Malala Yousafzai’s autobiography also exposed the endless challenges that women have to face even for gaining education in a patriarchal Muslim society. Durrani’s plight in a conservative society was no exception. Bama, the dalit feminist also rightly comments it in her novel *Sangati* when she says a woman is moulded, shaped or conditioned for men even from childhood. Bama laments on the passivity of dalit women and exhorts them to rethink on their status through Pathima Pillai:

When everything is added up and calculated, it seems to me that society is arranged as if God created women only for the convenience of men. In daily practice, women have to make sure that men don’t suffer discomfort, that they are consoled and comforted, all their needs looked after, and all their bodily hungers satisfied. In short, they must be conscious every minute of their day that men are at the very centre of their lives (122).

Durrani realizes marriage as an irrevocable snare which is hard to escape when she says: “I had fallen into the classic trap of the Pakistani woman. The goal is marriage and, once achieved, the future is a life of total subordination. I had no power, no rights, no will of my own” (100). Durrani suppressed and silenced her real self like Khar’s former wife Sherry when she says:

Whenever he found Durrani laughing or joking with her parents his mood darkened and soon he found a pretext for an argument. “I just tried my best not to provoke him. If I dared to object in some meager way, the beating was only worse. At last I understood

Sherry's dilemma – by the minute I became like her (106).

In *My Feudal Lord*, Durrani vehemently criticises the indifferent attitude of the patriarchal society which prefers beautiful women to be an object of love through the grandmother's advice to her for being pretty to win the love of their parents as “Your mother will love you more if you are looking nice” (27). “Cucumber juice, lemons, fresh cream and a pungent-smelling bleaching agent called Amex were rubbed into our mud-coloured faces” (26). Durrani painfully narrates her brutal ostracism from the family due to her dark skin, even sidelined by her mother who loved her fair skinned children as:

A dark child was condemned to neglect. And yet there I was, arriving in the world in 1953 with a dark skin. It seemed evident by my mother's attitude that she regarded me as ugly and was embarrassed to present me to friends and relatives. Even as a baby I felt my inadequacy. My surroundings seemed hostile to the way I looked, very early I withdrew into an isolated, ‘condemned - by - nature’ cell. I never remember my mother hugging or kissing me when I was little (27).

Durrani's embarrassingly details the immense struggle of a woman to attract her husband as her friends comments “He just loves you because you look good ... You dress well. You're good for his image. Once he sees you with curlers or with night creams slapped on your face he won't love you. He likes the package – not the reality” (80). Khar married his fifth wife in a hurry to assist him in his trip to US with Bhutto as Durrani exposes, “He was to accompany Bhutto to the US, and he was in a hurry to have a charming, well-bred and – best of all – a stunning woman on his arm as he walked into the White House” (52). Durrani exposes how a woman is marginalized, moulded and manufactured in a male dominated society. Simone de Beauvoir aptly quotes from *Le Rapport d'Uriel*, in *The Second Sex*:

A man's body has meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman's body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think of herself without a man. She is nothing other than man decides; she is thus called ‘the sex’, meaning that the male sees her as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She determines herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the subject; he is the absolute; she is the Other (6).

The extra marital affair which Durrani's father had with his colleague, blaming her mother's distorted appearances is an epitome for the unbridled freedom enjoyed by a man in a conservative society, bestowing him the right to replace women to satisfy his carnal desires. Durrani continued her unhappy marriage like every other woman, as she reveals “but by complicated external forces: my ego, fear of failure in the eyes of my family and society, fear of losing my children, fear of losing my status as a married woman” (168-169). Durrani introspects her own self, being sidelined when Khar prefers her sister “Who is he to choose? Why have I given this man the privilege of choosing between me and my sister? Why are we queuing for him to make his decision?” (182). Durrani is eager to continue her hellish life with Mustafa Khar because she is obsessed with her social status as a modest muslim woman and as she doesn't want to be a discussion in the malicious gossips as she exhorts “A Pakistani woman will endure almost anything in order to hold a marriage together” (55). She fears to be identified as a divorcee in the Pakistani Muslim society as she laments “A divorcee in Pakistani society is always a prime target for malicious gossip. Wagging tongues and leering glances turned me into



a recluse. I spent most of my time either at home or in the office” (85). “A Pakistani woman will endure almost anything in order to hold a marriage together. In our society, marriage may be purgatory, but divorce is hell” (77). But later Durrani gets out of the hellish marriage snare as a woman with identity by disowning her property rights. Durrani by stepping out of the traditional marriage bonds like Nora in Ibsen’s *Dolls House* and like Jaya in *That Long Silence* proclaims, Mustafa could not force me to continue the marriage, but he could leave me destitute” (283). Women are not regarded as individuals with their own rights and values regarded as “the jewel of (his) crown”. Durrani says, “I could see the distinction between a common criminal and a political prisoner, and tried to paint a word picture of their father as pure goodness” (234)

Durrani learned more about Mustafa Khar from his earlier wife Sherry that he was a sadist who derives pleasure in torturing the women he professed to love. She narrates endless stories about his brutal torture of Naubhar and Safia. Durrani’s case was no exception she was also brutally punished and was thrown to the floor, kicked and hit her head against the corner of the bed side and blood gushed out from her from her eyes. Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* also has a cruel character named Harpo who says that he has to beat his wife because his father does. In fact, he is advised by his father, “wives are like children. You have to let them know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do better than a good sound beating. G.M. Trevelyan has rightly observed in his *History of England* that wife beating was a recognized right of man and was practiced without shame by high as well as low. (35) When a man attains the right to torture women as heredity, women’s liberation loses all its meaning. According to Sarah Grimke, all history is male centric and she argues:

Man has subjugated women to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she has created to fill. He has done all that he could do to debase and enslave her mind and now he looks triumphantly on the ruin he has wrought and says, the being he has thus deeply injured is his inferior. (Letter II)

Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* is not a saga of suffering alone but in the end she echoes the clarion of women emancipation like Bama who proclaims that “Women can make and women can break” in *Sangati*. Durrani passively cursed herself and God at the time of her pregnancy and even tried to commit suicide in the earlier phase of her marital life with Mustafa Khar. The later part of the novel witnesses Durrani’s struggle for survival and the amazing reconstruction to resist back for her rescue from domestic violence, when Khar threatened her like “I’ll break every bone in your body” she mustered up the courage to proclaim her protest and she showered him with hot water in the pot from the stove. When he screamed in pain she roared: “The next time you raise your hand to me I will pick up a knife and kill you!” (188). Khar was conclusively convinced about the innate vigour and violence in the victim, when Durrani retorted to his earlier comment of Khar: “Tehmina, you are nothing anymore. Once you were Begum Tehmina Mustafa Khar. Now you are just Tehmina Durrani. When you ring up people, you have to introduce yourself as my ex-wife” (373-74). Durrani establishes her identity and leaves him proclaiming: “Well, Mustafa, now the world will soon know you only as Tehmina Durrani’s ex-husband” (382). Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* is not a saga of suffering but a real voice of the voiceless. It springs from her confidence to fight against patriarchy and Feudalism and clarion call for women to emancipate themselves from hibernation to resistance as she comments

“I was determined not to waste thirteen years of my life .I decided to cast a stone at hypocrisy.I decided to write this book and break the tradition of silence”(375).

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