

The Institutionalisation of Patriarchal Control through Religious Discourse: A Comparative Study of *I Am Malala* and *My Feudal Lord*

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Abstract

This study examines the way religious discourses have been employed to justify patriarchal control over women, particularly within the Muslim community. Alongside the rigid traditional and cultural constraints, religion has often been perceived as a coercive medium to legitimise the subjugation and exercise of patriarchal control over women. Rather than viewing religious norms and practices as a mere form of oppression, the paper explores how, alongside cultural and social expectations, religious interpretations are regarded as superior and hence institutionalise patriarchal control to regulate women's lives. The paper identifies and examines such instances in two selected autobiographical texts: *I Am Malala* (2013) by Malala Yousafzai with Christian Lamb and *My Feudal Lord* (1991) by Tehmina Durrani. Through a comparative analysis, the study investigates how women writers expose the misuse of religion as a tool to exert power over them and examines how such practices determine the control of women's education, autonomy, marriage, mobility and identity within such deeply entrenched patriarchal settings

Furthermore, the paper illustrates how autobiographical narrative challenges patriarchal control and questions such regimes to reclaim their identity and voice. The study will employ comparative analysis and draw on feminist theory, Foucault's understanding of power and discourse, and Islamic feminist scholarship. Deeper engagement in revealing the intricate relationship between religious principles and oppression in South Asian societies for women shall further examined highlighting the significance of women's life writing and storytelling as a powerful medium for social critique.

Keywords: Feminism, Religion, Patriarchy, Agency, Oppression, Autobiography, Storytelling

Introduction

In many South Asian countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, as well as across the Middle East and North Africa, patriarchy has remained a deeply rooted social structure for centuries, determining the lives of women in all aspects. Alongside cultural and traditional norms, religious teachings have often played a significant role in shaping women's autonomy and rights. While the Muslim religion has been widely recognised for promoting moral and ethical values, its selective interpretation by male authorities has often been used to legitimise the oppression of women and maintain patriarchal power structures, resulting in the passive participation of women in both social and political fields. As a result, religious discourses have often been used to exert power over women's education, mobility and overall decision-making.

In a Muslim community, the Holy Quran serves as an important, or even ultimate, source of ethical guidance through which a society is expected to operate, following the words of Allah. However, interpretations and applications of certain religious teachings vary across different social and cultural contexts. In some socio-cultural settings where societies

are shaped by strong patriarchal traditions and norms, there appear to be selective interpretations of religious teachings which are sometimes invoked to regulate and limit women's freedom, mobility, and choices. There has been constant contestation regarding women's role and position in Muslim society. While multiple men have sought to control women, believing that their superiority has been sanctioned by God, Allah, women, at the same time, argue that such laws primarily benefit men and diminish women's value and freedom, thus making their lives miserable in numerous ways. Stacey argues that this perception of male power stems from the interpretation of the Quranic verses: "(1) men are physically stronger (Q 2:228); (2) men may discipline their wives (Q 4:34); (3) in a legal situation. She further writes:

The Qur'an outlines several steps towards reconciliation — the husband should begin by admonishing his wife. If she does not respond he should abandon the conjugal bed; he can beat her if she persists in disobedience (Q 4:34). (Stacey)

Though the Quran also states that men and women are equal beings, as reflected in verses such as 9:71 and 16:97, men have traditionally been regarded as the commanders, preachers, and rule makers within the family structure. As a result, biased interpretations of religious texts are quite possible, allowing men to use and interpret Allah's words in ways that may suppress, control, and discipline women according to their own interests. In such cases, women's autonomy is shaped by patriarchal interpretation, which often renders women powerless and expected to follow the authority and decisions made by men in society. Such a predicament primarily works against women's interests, as they are often viewed only in terms of childbearing and homemaking. Hence, it becomes evident that women's identities in such a picture are primarily tied to their role as a wife, mother and caregiver, while any aspirations or roles beyond the home are often regarded as inappropriate or sometimes unacceptable.

Moreover, there have been major studies where women are found to be stuck in a despondent condition, and they see no hope or change beyond their confined permitted space. Women in many communities are not even allowed to step outside without the husband's permission, or even when they go out, they are to be sent only with a male escort. According to Human Rights Watch's 2023 report:

Many Middle East and North Africa countries still prevent women from moving freely in their own country or travelling abroad without the permission of a male guardian" (Human Rights Watch).

In countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the advent of the Taliban regime, restrictions on women have been more stringent and authoritarian. Such rigid and biased restrictions imposed upon women often limit them to the domestic sphere, thereby limiting their participation in public life and further worsening their social condition. Over time, such patriarchal practices and social norms may become internalised, leading many women to accept their circumstances and regard suffering and silence as an inevitable part of women's condition. Thus, the status of Muslim women has been a contentious issue: "While many opponents feel that Islam is fundamentally responsible for women's oppression, others point to patriarchal and tribal cultures as contributing factors to women's precarious condition" (Power).

In many literary works written by Muslim women authors, these debates about women's status in society often find expression through storytelling, whether through poems, novels, or personal accounts. This expression challenges the dominant representation, which

often portrays women as passive figures in a literary arena whose identity and prominence lie solely within the four walls of the home. And thus, through autobiographical narratives, memoirs and fictional accounts, these women narrate their lived experiences, suffering and the impact of gender-biased, discriminatory norms against them. However, in many instances, due to their lack of exposure to the outside world, the stories of numerous women remain unacknowledged, while some die with their own stories, stories that are equally painful and worth sharing. This is what Carla Power reflects in her article, “In an effort to keep women shielded from public view, the lives and works of learned women were simply left unrecorded”. Although Muslim women had been writing for centuries, it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that Muslim women writers emerged in a literary arena, writing about their social condition, discrimination and violence, which intersect in complex ways with religion, culture and tradition. Atiya Fyze’s travel diary, written in the early twentieth century, is often considered the earliest example of Muslim women’s self-narration. According to *Accessing Muslim Lives*, “Atiya herself was to gain her first taste of renown as a writer after contributing a travel diary in serialised form to the Urdu journal for women, *Tehzib-e Niswan*. If one looks into the works of Muslim women authors, one is likely to encounter stories of suppression, gender-based discrimination, violence, and the many social and cultural restrictions that shaped their lives. Through writing, however, many of these women found a way to speak about experiences that had long remained unheard. In this context, autobiographies and memoirs best convey such women’s lived experiences, allowing them to narrate their lives, sufferings, and struggles in their own voices.

This paper attempts to examine how selective religious discourses were used as a means of controlling and suppressing women, thereby restricting their autonomy. To substantiate this argument, two autobiographical works by Muslim women, *I Am Malala* and *My Feudal Lord*, written by Malala Yousafzai and Tehmina Durrani, respectively, are taken up for a comparative study. This paper further undertakes a comparative examination of the texts mentioned above to explore how religious morals and teachings have been misinterpreted to serve the interests of men in society by restricting women’s freedom and agency. Although the two narratives emerge from different social and cultural circumstances, both reveal how religious teachings can sometimes be invoked within society to legitimise the dominant control over women.

Analysis

My Feudal Lord and *I Am Malala* are categorised as autobiographical writings; both offer significant accounts of religious and patriarchal practices that have deeply affected the authors’ lives. In the context of women’s writing, autobiography becomes a powerful medium through which a woman can narrate their own life authentically. The narratives also show that a woman’s work cannot be fully understood without considering the social structures and circumstances surrounding her. It is evident that, in women’s lives, family, community, marriage, religion, and cultural norms often tangle their choices and limit their freedom.

Both Durrani and Yousafzai use their narratives to show how gender, religion, and culture have shaped their lives. Their stories, however, do not amplify or represent the experiences and status of all Muslim women. Rather, both texts should be understood as a significant comparative study that reveals how selective interpretations of religious doctrines and patriarchal control can produce different scenarios depending on social and cultural context. One of the most significant similar concerns emerging from both narratives is the way

religious discourse has been used to validate control over women. In the text, *I Am Malala*, Malala is shot multiple times by the Taliban men on her way home from school, all because she had advocated for women's rights to education. It is crucial to understand that the Taliban's regime was not simply an obligation towards any religious belief; rather, it emerged from their own unbalanced interpretation of Islamic laws, through which they sought to control the entire community by establishing their own version of truth and system of rules. Such restrictions and control over basic humanitarian rights affect both women and men equally, even exercising control over children. This argument can be further examined through Michel Foucault's concept of power; the Taliban's control over the community shows how power operates not only through physical force but also by controlling the truth itself, which, in this case, happens to be the truth that is imposed upon the people, upheld with power, force and fear. For Foucault, power does not sit in a headquarters. It is dispersed throughout society, operating through relationships, institutions, norms, and language" (Sociology Institute). Taliban, by imposing their own interpretation of Islamic laws, control and restrain people's everyday lives, especially women, restricting them from their basic needs and rights. "He said the Taliban had even banned women from laughing out loud, or wearing white shoes as white was the colour that belonged to men" (Malala 55). Foucault's analysis of power is useful here, where power is exercised through the circulation of dominant knowledge and norms. The Taliban authority is therefore sustained through both physical forces and religious discourses, which put women in a subordinate position to accept the truth and power enforced upon them. Further, Malala also draws attention to what Islam as a religion truly represents, rather than the biased interpretation imposed by those who use religion to justify their authority. She challenges the rigid understanding of religion held by various groups of men who cling to religious rules as though they were a fixed workbook, leaving no room for interpretation, consideration, and individual freedom. Malala says, "Nowhere is it written in the Quran that a woman should be dependent on a man. The world has not come down from the heaven to tell us that every woman should listen to a man" (Malala 183). This reflects the very anxiety of a Muslim woman whose freedom and voice are determined by the man in and outside the family.

On the other hand, Tehmina Durrani's personal account reveals more about her domestic predicament as a Muslim wife of a feudal lord, Mustafa Khar. Her second marriage to Mustafa made her married life miserable and tumultuous; she was physically and mentally abused; however, societal pressure made it worse for her. Despite constant misery and suffering, her own mother and relatives have urged her to endure and protect her honour and marriage. Durrani states:

Despite the fact that our mother had divorced her first husband, we were taught that marriage was a sacred and irrevocable institution. 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 women's failure. (29)

This experience reflects Simone de Beauvoir's argument that women are often positioned as the "Other", where a woman's identity and choices are defined in relation to men, i.e, either in relation to her father or her husband. She was made to believe that breaking her marriage would bring her shame and invite unwanted gossip and social judgment, thus making her face rejection and isolation in a society. A divorcee in Pakistani society is always a prime target for

malicious gossip. Wagging tongues and leering glances turned me into a recluse. (Durrani 85). In a Muslim society, divorce comes with a lot of repercussions for women; sometimes there is no divorce unless their husband agrees. In such cases, even if they are divorced, society stigmatises such women, which makes it extremely challenging to live a normal life and further takes a toll on mental health for a lot of women. Durrani also exposes the gendered double standards where men in a society are provided with greater social freedom and choices in life, while women, on the other hand, struggle to even make a way out of a violent marriage. The Koran allows a man to have as many as four wives, but tempers this with the almost impossible requirements that he love them equally (Durrani 49). Durrani has been condemned and has been questioned about her virtue and dignity for her second marriage to Mustafa, while the significant other has no effect whatsoever with his multiple marriages. Further, Islamic law allows a man to kill his unfaithful wife in a fit of passion, but does not allow for premeditated vengeance (Durrani 52).

In her autobiography, she mentioned several times how desperately she tried to break free from her marriage, but because she would be ostracised and her own mother would have abandoned her, she had no hope for an alternate life. Foucault's concept of power is particularly relevant here; patriarchal authority is regulated not only through physical violence but also through the control of discourse and everyday social norms. Mustafa Khar's power and control are reinforced by a selective patriarchal interpretation of Islam, which positions the wife as the subordinate and the husband as their lord who shall direct them however he wants. Further, Foucault's concept of the 'regime of truth' can be understood as the system that shaped Mustafa's control and domination. As Foucault explains, each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true (qtd. in Ibana 2). Mustafa's coercive control over Tehmina was not limited to a wife's duty; it also governed, in every way possible, how she should dress, behave, and whom she could interact with. These strict regulations demonstrate Foucault's view of power as something operating through accepted social and religious truth. Thus, Durrani's narrative exposes how patriarchal conduct can make religious discourses appropriate to authorise and establish control over women.

In both texts, similar experiences of Muslim women are portrayed, where they had to struggle to claim their rightful freedom. In *My Feudal Lord*, Durrani shows how men in the family control women's autonomy and freedom through channels like marriage and family structures. The use of religious justification put forth to control women is subjected to patriarchal power. A similar concern can be observed in *I Am Malala*, where the denial of education, restricting women from public spaces, and being made to veil their entire bodies are presented through religious morals, which render control over women. Although the contexts differ from Durrani's, both narratives offer similar ideas about how selective interpretations of codes of conduct undermine women's social and public life. In *My Feudal Lord*, it is evident that such control is largely exercised within marriage and the family for women, whereas in *I Am Malala*, it operates through how the Taliban imposed restrictions and a set of rules for women, affecting their mobility, rights and voices. In both cases, however, these restrictions are presented as moral and necessary principles where women often fall as victims of such a patriarchal condition, as they are expected to follow the rules and expectations set by society. Consequently, such conditioning makes patriarchal practices

appear natural and acceptable, leading women to internalise these regulations rather than see them as forms of oppression and subjugation.

Conclusion:

Thus, it can be gathered from this paper that although patriarchy remains an integral part of society across different communities, religion as an institution can make the situation more intricate. When religious teachings are presented as unquestionable, women may find it difficult to question the interpretations imposed on them, which makes it difficult for women to even contest or oppose their words. The question, therefore, remains whether these interpretations are the words of God (Allah) itself or have been shaped by the people with the authority to interpret them. Excluding women from such spaces further limits their ability to have a say in the matter, and this is how men gain greater authority in social and cultural domains, while women are expected to conform to their father/husband's words and demands.

Therefore, the two texts examined in this paper portray how, along with social pressure, religious interpretations can become a means of subjugating women within Muslim households, leaving them with little freedom to make decisions about their own lives. Further, there have been many feminist activists and writers who have raised their voices against such injustices and gender-based discrimination. In a patriarchal setting such as Pakistan, women can experience marginalisation both within the family and in society. Both *My Feudal Lord* and *I Am Malala* highlight these forms of control while also showing the importance of women finding their own voices and questioning and challenging the structures that seek to clip their wings.

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