



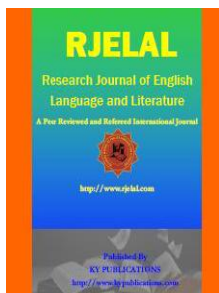
## SPEAKING FROM THE MARGINS: TEHMINA DURRANI'S MY FEUDAL LORD

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### ABSTRACT

Tehmina Durrani is a prominent woman writer of Pakistan. She writes about the subordinated and marginal status of women in Pakistani society. She portrays the miserable plight of women in a so-called democratic country. Her works reflect female subjugation and sufferings encountered by the majority of women in the conservative milieu of Pakistan. She articulates her own experiences and holds the political, religious and social mechanism responsible for such plight of women in society. The present paper analyses her autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord* and aims at studying various discourses like patriarchy, feudalism, misinterpretation of religion and social taboos, which, according to the novelist, are responsible for the oppression of women in society. Women, being at the marginal status, are deprived of the basic right of equality at economic, social, political and ideological levels. Durrani's novel analyses various incidents of ill-treatment by her husband and her efforts to break the age-long silence in the name of honour and God. She herself vivifies how her social conditioning prevents herself from rebellion and she always tries to be approved by other members of the family and society. She advises her fellow women not to accept such behaviour as their destiny and should resist such tendencies. The root cause of women's marginality – the discourse of patriarchy, feudalism etc. – should be dismantled. Women should be awakened that they would not become sinners if they get separated from their husbands, if they become divorcees. Durrani has made her voice heard to the mainstream by writing this autobiography.

**Key Words:** Feudalism, marginality, *My Feudal Lord*, patriarchy, suppression, Tehmina Durrani.

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The theme of marginality has acquired immense significance in the postmodern world. Marginal state is that position of a person in which one is deprived of some basic rights of a society. That person or community is considered insignificant in comparison to the mainstream. Peter Brooker in *A Glossary of Cultural Theory* writes, "Margin(ality)—Refers to the place of repressed or subordinated textual meanings but also to the

position of dissident intellectuals and social groups (women, lesbian, gays, blacks) who see themselves at a remove from the normative assumptions and oppressive power structures of mainstream society (152)". The social groups like the *Dalits*, women, lesbians, gay, blacks, assume that the mainstream society has acquired the central position in society. In that society, they are considered subordinated to the mainstream society and this mainstream group

try to oppress these groups and if they try to raise their voices against them, they remain unheard by them. The central group makes efforts to dominate the subordinate one.

The present paper focuses on Tehmina Durrani's autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord*, in which it has been analysed that the people have been acculturated to such extent that the institutions like marriage and family have become a source of victimisation and violence. According to Durrani, the patriarchy, feudalism, ignorance of women of the laws of the country for the protection of women's rights and their tendency to accept their plight as their destiny, are the root causes of women's marginal position in such a society.

Tehmina Durrani is a significant Pakistani woman writer, who writes about the subordinated and marginal position of women in Pakistani society. She portrays the miserable plight of women in a so-called democratic country. Her works reflect female subjugation and sufferings encountered by the majority of women in the conservative milieu of Pakistan. She articulates her own experiences and holds the political, religious and social mechanism responsible for such plight of women in society. Her works include: *My Feudal Lord* (1994), *Mirror to the Blind* (1996), *Blasphemy* (1998) and *Happy Things in Sorrow Times* (2013). She was born on 18<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1953 in an elite family of Pakistan. Her father Shakirullah U. Durrani had been a Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan and former chairman of Pakistan International Airlines, whom Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, had once sent to prison. Her mother Samina came from the Hayat family of Khattar tribe. At an age of seventeen, Tehmina was married to Anees Khan, who was a junior executive in the National Shipping Corporation of Pakistan.

Since childhood, the women are given a thorough conditioning by the family and society for the proper functioning of society in the prevailing state. As Swati Srivastava and Avneesh Kumar Singh opine:

The focus of her autobiography is the institution of marriage and family which are thoroughly embedded in cultural practices. Pakistan is one of those countries where

unfortunately violence against women has traditionally dominated the cultural scene. Durrani's discourse closely follows helplessness in these circumstances and the overall patriarchal system which dominates both public and private spheres. (160)

The social discourse of patriarchy excludes all kinds of participation by women in the functioning of society. Man is the accepted head in such a society and woman has to live under his control and according to his wishes. She does not have the right to decide even about her own career or life. She cannot even participate in her own family decisions. From one generation to another, men and women are given apprenticeship so that they may not question about their roles. All the members are trained to succumb to their roles. Since the man is considered the natural head of the family, so the female members are asked to obey the male members of the family. If they do not do so, they are made obedient through physical violence, suppression and fear. They are realised that unless they obey their parents or husband, they will not be considered good daughters or wives. This social conditioning is called as the process of "acculturation" by Chris Barker. In The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies, he defines the process of "acculturation" as:

The ability to 'go on' in a culture requires the learning and acquisition of language, values and norms through imitation, practice and experimentation. The concept of acculturation refers to the social processes by which we learn the knowledge and skills that enable us to be members of a culture. Key sites and agents of acculturation would include the family, peer groups, schools, work organizations and the media. (2)

Tehmina Durrani also encounters such behaviour in her parents' and later at her husband's house. Due to her dark complexion, Tehmina could not become her mother's favourite. Although she obeyed her mother's commands, the latter was not satisfied with her:

My mother demanded total obedience and, although I always complied, she discerned early signs of rebellion in both my expression and my body language. I obeyed, but my crime was that I did not look obedient. (24)

Tehmina is made obedient by her mother, as she is realised that if she does not obey her parents, she will not be considered a good daughter, "The lesson was clear and I learnt it well: blind acquiescence was necessary to gain approval; being yourself earned only condemnation. I was acceptable only when I was unlike myself – whoever that was – because I wore a mask of submission. I developed a personality that was against my true nature, but compatible with mother's. Inwardly I became confused and sometimes ashamed that what I must really be was incorrect and unacceptable (25)". The result of this conditioning is that she loses all her confidence and thinks of an escape from such an environment of her house. She along with her siblings is taught to be perfect in looking, what they actually are, does not matter:

we were being raised to be 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. My mind became a sanctuary for secret thoughts of escaping from this household. But for that there was no other goal in life but marriage. (29-30)

In such families, the daughters are taught to be perfect daughters, perfect wives. If any of them think of doing something different, she is considered "queer", "strange", or "other". If the woman tries to do so, she feels herself confused because she herself does not about her own conditioning. All this process of acculturation appears "natural" to her, as she is made learn that women are by nature calm, meek, docile, passive, under-control and subservient. They are the other side of man. If man is strong, active, controller, violent, woman is the opposite. These are the binary oppositions created by the society, which do not consider man and woman equal to each other; rather they are presented opposite to each other. This confusion

makes Tehmina feel like a person of low esteem and she wants approval from her mother at any cost. By marrying Anees Khan, she has tried to escape from the dominance imposed by her mother, but Anees is a person of weak personality like her father, also not liked by her mother:

I was haunted by feelings of being a non-person and by extremely low self-esteem. If mother did not approve of me and love me, Anees's weak opinion – and those of his lower-positioned family – was of little consequence. (37-38)

That is the reason Tehmina is attracted by the personality of Mustafa Khar, who is a feudal lord who knows every tact to entrap women, she herself says, "*Shikar* taught Mustafa courage, endurance and patience. And through hunting he grasped the importance of strategy and tactical manoeuvring. He learned how to lure, entice and entrap (41)". Whenever he likes a woman, she becomes his wife. Whenever he becomes fed up with and wants to get rid of her, she at once gets out of her life, everything depends upon his desire, as observed by Durrani, "Women entered Mustafa's life speedily and left just as quickly (44)". It is his skill that Tehmina feels herself entrapped in his love-affair: "his eyes had me riveted" . . . "I was drawn like a moth to a flame" . . . "I was the perfect victim" (21). It is this skill of Mustafa that makes Tehmina ready to divorce Anees and marry her. She is fallen in the trap by Mustafa. Now she is his wife, she has to live her life according to her husband's wishes. Such restrictions were also imposed by Tehmina's second husband Mustafa Khar, "Never – ever – disobey me! You have to do what I tell you to do (95)". All his feudal traditions are endorsed by him as written in Koran, as Tehmina says, "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 (107)". She has to accept the interpretation of Koran as given by her husband. She recalls similar interpretation given to her by her mother in her childhood. In this way, the religion is used to exploit and take women under control. Religion is misinterpreted by such lords to subjugate women. According to Ehsaan et al,

Astoundingly, when Tehmina conceived as an effect of Mustafa's fierce rapist anguishes, he acquires a lot of personal heed of her. This bestow to sexual ascendancy of the wife by the husband patriarchic talk does not consider sex as a mode of reciprocal physical delight but somewhat as a tool of domination. (57)

In a patriarchal society, a woman is considered ideal who lives according to her husband's wishes. Societal conditioning does the remaining task, as remarked by Ujwala M. Gosavi, "Tehmina's conventional upbringing conditioned by her patriarchal social environment, in which she lived, made her accept her husband Mustafa's physical assaults and sexual brutality, enduring these attacks as a part of her destiny (120)". The feudal set up of the society makes the plight of women worse. The woman is considered the property of man equal to land:

Apart from family, the feudal system in the society has also caused severe antipathy towards women. The famous proverb of such system "*Zan, Zar, Zameen*" (woman, money and land) as the source of all evil, does reflect utter disregard for women and also her commoditisation. (Bhattacharya 187)

In feudal society, man has privileged position, "Feudal law allows a man to act in such a manner, but for a wife to betray a husband is the supreme sin (51)". It is this privileged right of man which allows him to punish the woman as he desires. Tehmina is also punished by Mustafa due to her former marriage with Anees:

Suddenly he threw me down on to the bed and jumped on me. Sitting astride my belly, he slapped me in the face repeatedly with his open palm, forehand and backhand . . . he pulled at my hair, thrusting my head from side to side. Like lightning, he leaped off me. One hand clutched my long, braided hair and jerked me off the bed and on to the floor . . . He threw me against a wall, picked me up and threw me against another one – again, and again, and again. (102-103)

She has to consult a doctor for her burst ear drum and for a serious eye injury. Even Mustafa does not like Tehmina's talking to her brother. He does not like her answering back to him. She is also not allowed to read the newspaper. He cuts her from the outside world and made her imprisoned in the four walls of his house. Every night she has to face the same violent and brutal behaviour of her husband. However, Tehmina suffers all this because she has been internalised that a woman is respectable in society if she is in obedience of her husband. Divorced woman does not get respect in Pakistani society, "In our society, marriage may be purgatory, but divorce is hell (77)" and "A divorcee in Pakistani society is always a prime target for malicious gossip. Wagging tongues and leering glances turned me into a recluse (85)". She has already been divorced from Anees and therefore, divorce for the second time would make her an outcast in the society. She feels herself to be a person who is trapped in a prison and has no will of one's own:

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)

The violent behaviour goes on as she has proved herself an adulterous by divorcing Anees. On the contrary, he himself has been married for the sixth time; rather he justifies his marriage with Tehmina as a choice for a right wife and to be fallen in love with her. He uses this as a weapon to mistreat her, "He continued to use my first marriage as a stick to beat me with; my divorce and remarriage had proved him that I was capable of adultery (106)". Woman's adultery is not tolerated by these feudal lords:

When he [Mustafa] had discovered Safia's infidelity, he had apparently, beaten her without mercy and broken several of her ribs. But, even worse, he had ordered one of the maids to insert red chili powder into the vagina of poor Dai Ayesha, the nanny, for not informing of the affair. (94)

Very manipulatively, Mustafa makes Durrani realised that the reputation of her husband would

crumble down if she dared to tell anything about this event to anyone. Her husband is the Lion of the Punjab, and he would be humiliated if it appeared before the people that he treated his wife so badly. Moreover, people would not respect her, knowing that her husband did not respect her:

Your position will be reduced to the lowly one that all my other wives had. I don't want you to be humiliated. Nobody should ever say that I dared or wished to lift my hand to you. I want people to respect you – if they thought that I didn't, why should they? . . . I was conditioned to believe in the concept that image is the paramount thing. This was a personal and private matter between my husband and me. (104)

Not only this, Mustafa also exploited Tehmina's younger sister Adila sexually. When Tehmina opposes all this, she is proved as “mentally sick person” by him:

'Tehmina isn't well at all,' he said with feigned compassion. He referred to meningitis that had struck me down as a child . . . 'She's imagining things,' he contended. (166)

He also beats her violently in her father's house, to which she resists, “This is my father's house and I do not think that you should dare to lift your hand on me here! (134)”.

Whenever Durrani has tried to tell about the affair between Mustafa and Adila, she is treated very badly. Once, Mustafa humiliates her by making her take off her clothes. He shouts, “Stand up, you bitch! . . . 'Take off your clothes,' he shouted. 'Every stitch. Take . . . them . . . off' (164)”.

Now Tehmina tries to resist his brutal behaviour, she gets the double the punishment as a result. When Mustafa hits Tehmina with a jug, she says openly before the guests at a dinner party, “Mustafa hit me” (216). Nonetheless, she received the treatment which is doubly violent:

Later, in our bathroom, insolence was punished with yet another slap. He called me an exhibitionist, a woman without shame. (216)

She becomes unconscious, as a result of the brutal behaviour received by her husband, which she could

not avoid even after pleading a hundred times and confesses that she would not raise her voice before him.

Although Durrani tries to leave Mustafa many times and in the end, she becomes successful in separating from him; yet she has to face so much emotional blackmailing. Once, Mustafa kidnaps his own children to force her to return to him. Another time, he locks her up in the bathroom. However, Tehmina has to leave the custody of her children, she has to leave financial assistance provided by her husband and she disowned her own parents. Thus, she has to pay so much for a life of independence. Then, she makes it the purpose of her life to raise a voice against injustice and break the silence imposed upon her by the patriarchy.

Durrani has articulated the experiences from the view point of marginal, and therefore, they appear unrestrained, elaborate and unpleasant to the readers. However, according to Soumita Adhikary, “Durrani tries to bring out the pain in her description so that the reader undergoes a similar experience of horror and recoil and in a way lives it; as he reads through the lines (382)”. According the novelist, only by reading the severity faced by the author, the reader may be familiar to the view point of the author. An author writes from a specific perspective, because he is encountered with different circumstances in life. She has tried to make the readers realise the violence encountered by her. In an online interview, Durrani has admitted that she writes from a specific perspective and she has broken her silence about those issues, about which none talk about:

Well I am a woman, so I naturally write from a feminine perspective . . . My work . . . is about issues that concern our people, about breaking of a silence from a part of the society that cannot speak out. I am called bold because these are the issues one does not talk about, nor does one talk about one's life . . . (qtd in Srivastava157)

Tehmina has written her autobiography to share her views about the plight of women in Pakistan. The women do not raise their voices because they are made subordinated by their own family members and the society. By breaking the age-long silence in

the name of honour, she has tried to vindicate that facing all kind of oppression, subjugation and violent behaviour is not justifiable in any manner. By rejecting a feudal lord and by giving divorce to him, Tehmina rejects all kinds of subordination in society. She indicates that a divorced woman also has a life of her own. In the novel, she concerns a lot about her children and tolerates all kinds of suppression for them. Yet she expects that her children would understand her circumstances and they would also react in a similar manner. She prays for them that they would not oppress others and would not tolerate any kind of oppression.

In short, by raising the voice against the dominant feudal lord, she inspires the others that the people on the margins can also speak and their voice would be heard. She challenges Mustafa that the people would know him as the wife of Tehmina Durrani. Now, Tehmina Durrani is a popular name as one of the social activists of Pakistan, who struggle for the women cause. In other words, she has made herself heard. Everyone knows of Tehmina, as her voice has not remained unheard.

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