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## A JOURNEY FROM SELF-EFFACEMENT TO SELF-DISCOVERY IN TEHMINA DURRANI'S MY FEUDAL LORD

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### ABSTRACT



A society that operates with male-dominated ideologies and mechanisms contributes to the disempowerment and subjugation of woman. This paper studies predicament of Muslim wives in society of Pakistan through institution of marriage as depicted in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*, an autobiographical narrative. The publication of *My Feudal Lord* received many awards and made it exceptional and extraordinary literary work, which surfaces the issues of Muslim women of Pakistan, and is still relevant as it contributes to the feminist cause. The book is a painful account of a woman's traumatic marriage in Pakistan, who suffers in silence for thirteen years and then decides to come out of the life of abuse and humiliation. It also highlights the hidden agency of a woman that has the potential to expose and challenge a male dominated society. Durrani's courage, resistance and mighty pen become agents for change. These agents, along with exposition of assumed authority of debauchery and superiority of male culture assist her in dismantling established societal pattern of marriage. The process of evolution encourages her to reflect on the woes of other women in Pakistani society and the ways to counter violence, inequality and isolation in feudal trap. The paper demonstrates concerns like inequality, violence and male dominance and argues that despite caught in a patriarchal trap woman with her conviction and female agency finds a way to be heard and asserts herself in a conservative society. This paper traces the journey of Tehmina Durrani from a life of oppression and humiliation to self-discovery. The basis for this paper is formed through writings of Elaine Showalter with an intention to relate the considerations to self-discovery of Durrani. *My Feudal Lord* reflects on incarceration of the self and attempts to come out of entrapment by asserting femaleness through creativity and self-discovery.

Keywords: Oppression, Female, Patriarchy, My Feudal Lord, Tehmina Durrani, Self-discovery

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Tehmina Durrani, one of the most influential author and activist of Pakistan writes about issues that concern people of her society and specifically depicts the exploitative patriarchal boundaries for women, which impede them from realizing their potential. She is one of the post-

colonial South Asian writer who herself has been a victim of male supremacy and violence and writes about female issues of Muslim world. This distinguishes her writings and makes her voice more powerful than any other feminist post-colonial writers from the Western world. Durrani's novels

delineate women's pitiable plight and their struggle for identity and existence. Her autobiography *My Feudal Lord* holds a mirror to age-old deep-rooted dominating patriarchal customs and traces her journey from suppression to self-discovery. The book describes different phases of a woman's life that aptly relate to the three phases asserted by Elaine Showalter in the development of feminist tradition: "Imitation, protest and self-discovery i.e. feminine, feminist, and female, respectively" (Showalter 13). The female condition in Pakistani society and the process of Durrani's self-discovery is highlighted through these phases in this paper.

Durrani (18 February 1953, Lahore) belongs to one of the most influential families of Pakistan and was brought up in Lahore's high society. She is the daughter of late former Governor of State Bank of Pakistan, Shakur Ullah Durrani and is the former wife of Mustafa Khar, the Ex-Chief Minister of Punjab and one of the founders of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). For thirteen years she lives in a traumatic married life with a feudal politician Mustafa Khar, which was fraught with humiliation, fear and violence. She silently endures all and ultimately gathers courage and challenges him by writing *My Feudal Lord* in 1994, a fictional autobiography and thereby gives voice to the physical and mental agonies of her life. Text is highly acclaimed worldwide and won her many awards including Italy's prestigious Marissa Bellasario Prize. An article "A woman's story that shook Pakistan" published in Asian Times, UK reported her as the first Pakistani woman to challenge the mighty bastion of establishment sexism in her country.

Durrani's work bears immense significance as a tool of resistance for feminist studies in its capacity as a first personal and intimate record of marital life to be made public by a woman of Pakistan. The courage born out of her troubled marriage starts the journey of her life in real sense, making her a center stage woman from a mere battered wife and leads her to write more books: *Mirror to the Blind*, narrated biography of Abdul Sattar Edhi, the renowned Pakistan's social worker; *Blasphemy*, a fictionalized biographical account of an abused wife of a Pakistani feudal religious leader and *Happy Things in Sorrow Times*, a fiction book on

children of war. This journey of hers from self-effacement to self-discovery also made her an activist for women's rights in Pakistan.

*My Feudal Lord* explores different feministic aspects embraced by a woman: stone silence, refusal to react, the gradual but sure emergence of individualism defying the traditional norms with growing awareness. According to Durrani when conviction for change is strong the fear of exposing private life and challenging the male supremacy ultimately diminishes. Her text is divided into three parts: "Lion of the Punjab", "Law of the Jungle" and "Lioness" and traces the growth of the protagonist from a submissive woman to a lioness. In an interview to IANS (India Abroad News Service), she explains:

Able truth is that I started my struggle with the writing of the book ... I felt it was very important to break the silence ... It took three years, after my divorce to metamorphose from Tehmina Khar to Tehmina Durrani ... was rather a difficult phase ... I was looking for an identity ... what I was in myself, what I wanted to do? (Interview 1998).

Since her childhood Durrani was conscious of the patriarchal traditions of her family, in which the rules were forced on female for fear of rebellion and to crush their tender spirits. Her family's prominent political status was a problem for her, as it was guided by conservative rules regarding the role of woman. Therefore, the decisions taken by her parents under socio-cultural pressures play a major role in her upbringing and future. These decisions are responsible for bringing traces of self-effacement in her personality and haunts throughout her life. Her mother practices patriarchy and encumbers her daughters' childhood with numerous dictates. She upholds the patriarchal tradition to suppress and subdue her daughter's individuality. Family members infuses inferiority complex in her regarding her dark color and it brings difference in responsibilities and parental love. Her mother considers dark skinned Durrani as ugly over her fair siblings, "My mother was embarrassed to present me to friends and relatives" (MFL 23). Her father has the second say in everything and was

hesitant in expressing his love for Durrani due to mother's disapproval of her. Durrani starts realizing that she is acceptable only when she is distanced from her own-self wearing a mask of submissiveness. She withdraws into isolation and submission by effacing her true self and masking it with the expected one.

In her adolescence, she puts her wish of marrying Anees out of love and also as the only substitute of escape, which reveals her inner quest for liberty. But soon after marriage it occurs to her that she does not love Anees enough; she gets attracted towards Mustafa Khar who is double her age. Tehmina's childhood experiences haunt her self-esteem and impacts her life psychologically "My mind remained troubled by a childhood ... I did not know how to come to terms with it" (MFL 37). She likes Mustafa because of his authoritarian and overpowering nature which was in contrast to her father's weak role and responsible for her sufferings. She marries Mustafa and enjoys her conjugal life with him for some time. Durrani is no exception to other women and fashions herself to cater her husband's preferences, be it appearance, attire or makeup. In the first phase of Durrani's life as a female writer, she attempts to imitate the traditional mode of mainstream culture. She acts as expected, "I was no different ... dressed for Mustafa ... I was flattered when Mustafa noticed, and upset when he did not" (MFL 65). She is happy to water the seeds of patriarchal models in the hope of a better future, and was learning to hide her feelings and bruises from the world. This phase fits in the feminine phase of Elaine Showalter who quoted "First, there is a prolonged imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition" (Showalter 13). Moreover, Durrani abides by the conventional social expectations of a married woman, but soon the true immoral and cruel nature of Khar is revealed to her. Beatings become a routine. Durrani silently and meekly surrender to him every night and realizes that her only *raison d'être* is to be an instrument for the satisfaction of Khar's sexual desires and reproduction like other women. It reveals the complicated pattern of the life of a married woman, which is adorned with humiliation and sexual abuse, where authoritative

and overpowering male ego smashes the female sensibility and crushes the soul. For Durrani her marital home becomes a confined space, no wish and it offers total surrender, her marital home aligns to the words of Simone De Beauvoir, "She shuts behind her the doors of her new home ... now she is confined to a restricted space (Beauvoir 447). A woman does not have identity of her own; it is always defined in relation to her role as a daughter, mother and wife etc. And this difference regarding her role before and after marriage in a traditional society provides many opportunities to males for dominating females. Her husband is the potent symbol of patriarchy, a schizophrenic man; he does not care for his wife's existence and demands loyalty, patience and complete obedience. When she fails, then he has the full authority to practice violence.

Durrani's role of a wife hinders her self-development. Durrani presents family and marriage as destroyer of individualism that have a worst impact on her life. Khar spies on her all the time and even restricts her freedom of thought, "You dare not think of anything that I have forbidden you to think about" (MFL 108) and highlights the traditional male governed approach. Durrani learns that the only future available to a girl is to get married and maintain marriage in every situation, "I found it impossible to react in any sensible manner. Mustafa had turned me into vegetable" (MFL 136). Her initial role of an automated child and now of an honor bound wife exert excessive influence on her mind, she could not think what was right for her. The more she employs the patriarchal models the more confused she becomes and does not raise her voice against Khar. To state Viola Klein's words, women as a subordinate sex is characterized by obedience and submission and under male dominance women have "developed a tendency to prevail by passive means" (Klein 167). Durrani keeps own wishes in the background and attempts to make her husband happy, firstly out of love and soon out of compulsion so that any act of disobedience to his dictates does not invite violence and wrath. Sree, in her book *Alien Among Us* has said that Durrani belongs to a society where the Muslim patriarchs dominate and the woman is relegated to the secondary, rather

inferior rung in the ladder of importance, intellectually and socially (Sree 29). Oppression continues, after every beating he would apologize and she would believe him. Socio-cultural constructs play a major role in determining and molding the life and psyche of woman. Sharad Rajimwale in his book on literary criticism rightly states that the female psyche is the product or construction of cultural forces (Rajimwale 96). Durrani confesses: Mustafa slapped me ... I suppressed my cries ... beat me savagely. I faced my mother as if nothing had happened (MFL 114). Jasam states most of the time women comply with these traditions and hence become disciplined subjects (Jasam 63). Khar strips Durrani nude, rapes her many times against her will, but she cannot expect support. Society deems male domination and authority over woman's body in marriage as normal, so no hearing and protection.

Then gradually, there emerges a new woman with new found courage and self-confidence and protest against societal ideologies by adopting the feminist role. In the second phase as a feminist writer, she begins to realize the cause of her sufferings by adhering to the traditional modes: "My marriage is sustained not by the relationship, but by complicated external forces: my ego, fear of failure, losing children, losing my status as a married woman" (MFL 174). Elaine Showalter described this as feminist phase characterized by protest against dominant standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights, including a demand for autonomy (Showalter 13). This change in Durrani comes at the time of her son Ali's birth, when Durrani makes her first meaningful contact with life and with other women who have similar stories to share. She recalls: I came alive again ... learned (MFL 186-187).

Durrani's growing awareness leads her to reject Khar's abusive behavior and it becomes a breaking point in her docility and acceptance of a situation passively. The bondage to man-made traditions only blocks the growth of mind and soul and if woman wants to search for her identity and emancipation, the only way out is that she must speak and learn to raise her voice against oppression. On one of the occasions, Khar kicks her down from a staircase and keeps beating her till she cries out: This is my father's house and I do not think

that you should dare to lift your hand on me here (MFL 134). During another act of violence, Durrani asserts point blankly "Don't be foolish, Mustafa. Grow up. You don't need to hit me. Talk to me like an adult ... As he attacked, I clawed at his face and pulled his hair. No woman had dared do this to Mustafa ... his mind was devising new blueprints of terror ... he was ... even frightened by my resistance (MFL 189-190). But Durrani's protests become feeble once she realizes that her family won't support, her father warns "You can only leave his home in a coffin. This is the point on which I take you back into the family" (MFL 126). It exposes the failure of a patriarchal family structure when it comes to take a stand for woman and also social injustice due to gender discrimination. Even when Durrani tells her parents about her sister Adila's affair with Khar, they neither trust nor support her. She files for divorce many times but returns. This time her feudal husband goes to the worst extent by abducting their own children in order to get her back in the trap and use her for his own vested interests. Durrani returns for the safety of children and in hope of a better future for them. It shows the manifold fears and ties of a married woman that prevent her from realizing her-self and contributes to her suppression. She returns and dreams of release but reality stands in front of her like a stone wall: Divorce was just not possible ... law might be on my side, but in ... feudal world, a man retains control of his daughter ... A prisoner ultimately settles into a monotonous routine (MFL 143).

Later, the realization dawns upon Durrani that no one will help her in her sufferings and humiliation neither family nor society, but just her own self. Here begins the third phase of self-discovery. When Khar tries to rape Durrani in the jail, she growls: "You are sick – so sick! You bastard! It's impossible to be your wife ... I swear on God ... on the Prophet, if you dare to touch me now, I will never come back ... will leave you. I will get a divorce (MFL 277-278). Durrani's evolution uncovers Elaine Showalter's female phase, which exhibits "self-discovery, a turning inward freed from dependency of the opposition, a search for identity" (Showalter 13). Shabina Nishant Omar elaborates: Tehmina strives against all odds to escape all forms of

essential categorizing that render the minority woman both the victim and unwilling perpetrators of damning stereotypical metaphors both by Eurocentric imperialism and the patriarchal tenets of her Islamic society, the poor politics in Pakistani government and the social ethos of Pakistani marital life (Omar 2010).

Durrani is resolved to come out of the trap of male supremacy. This development is directed inwards in search of existence and aspirations and outwards for recognition. She leaves Khar, becomes homeless and destitute and finally divorces him. The fear of losing anything diminishes and she decides to expose her private life in a tradition governed society for a greater cause. She reaches a stage of self-actualization where she knows she is not a toy for husband's pleasure but has a life of her own and right to follow her will.

Durrani asserts her individuality and discovers the meaning of her life as a woman and as an individual. Such awakening results into rejection of notions of femininity and destroys the image of self-sacrificing woman and thereby leads to self-discovery. Durrani's literary creativity as a writer helps her in realizing self and act as a weapon against Khar. She says, I decided to write autobiography "not to waste fifteen years of my life ... to share my life so that our people might become aware of ... leadership, their values, their mentalities, their Islamic principles and their views on women. I decided to cast a stone at hypocrisy that is endemic because of our silence (MFL 373). Durrani's desire for existence and liberty lead her to realize her worth as a writer and also support her in exposition of feudal male mentality. This way the postcolonial Muslim women writers use the trauma of their lives to question the constraints of their socio-cultural and patriarchal domination and provide a framework for the future wherein their voices will be heard. Elaine Showalter contends that women as writers emphasize on self and psychodynamics of female creativity and holds the power to reverse the hierarchy. She sketches "taxonomy" of poetics of feminist criticism "in a hope that it will help to reconstruct the social, political and cultural experience of women" (Showalter 15).

Durrani answers Khar with publication and international success of *My Feudal Lord*, "Well, Mustafa now the world will know you only as Tehmina Durrani's ex-husband" (MFL 382). Hers is a journey from self-effacement to self-discovery, from a puppet to a goddess of victory who fights fearlessly. *My Feudal Lord* exposes custom bound society that practice patriarchy, matriarchy and hinders feminine development by strangulating female identity, dignity, and security. Durrani as a feminist activist appeal to other fellow comrades to fight against injustice: Silence condones injustice, breed sub-servience ... Mustafa Khar and other feudal lords thrive and multiply on silence. Muslim women must learn to raise their voices against injustice (MFL 375). Durrani's life-writing gives strength to women across the continent to come out of their veil, underneath which hidden are the woes galore and also help to change perception of male dominated society about role of woman. Durrani possess all three aspects of a gynocritic-imitation, protest and self-discovery and constructs a female framework that expresses the objectives of a gynocritic in Elaine Showalter's words "to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories" (Showalter 131). Durrani's words express her commitment to feminism in an interview, "Well I am a woman, so I naturally write from a feminine perspective. More than that, I am interested in reform. I suppose my passion for reform is overwhelming ... when anything overwhelms you that much you have a natural boldness because you step out of the realm of fear" (Interview 1997). Durrani possess an agency for change and turns the trauma of her life into a blessing and it also makes her mouthpiece of the women of Pakistan. Hers is a female vision of self-discovery and evolution of new woman. This vision creates new female space and destroys the established hierarchal structure.

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