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## WRITING BODIES: GENDERED VIOLENCE IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY SAARC FICTION IN ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT



Women in most of the Indian subcontinents are subjected to discrimination and violence almost on a daily basis. In many cases domestic violence covers the entire gamut of physical, sexual, verbal and psychological violence. Though brutal and undesirable, death often comes as a respite after a lifelong tale of torture and violence. This paper aims at a survey of the plight of women in these countries and the authentic portrayal of their conditions in the novels of select contemporary South Asian writers. It attempts to look comparatively at the literary representation of women's psychological trauma in the writings of Kunzang Choden from Bhutan, Tehmina Durrani from Pakistan, and Khaled Hosseini from Afghanistan. By using the cross-cultural examples from the select fiction of these novelists an attempt has been made to understand the similarities and differences of how psychological trauma is represented through fiction, and what this means for the female protagonists of the texts, the female writers, readers and the cultures and societies out of which these writings originate.

KEY WORDS: Gender, Body, Violence, Sexuality, Trauma

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Primarily focusing on such themes as human relationships, desires, passions, sexualities, gender inequalities and empowerment the novelists under discussion voice the age-old silence of the "gendered subalterns". This trauma discourse makes the muted trauma of South Asian women visible and attempts to create a framework that promotes the healing of trauma. The novels under discussion create a space, a site for contestation of ideologies in an effort to break the silence on gender-based violence by transforming it into a 'speaking' subject. This paper seeks to present a new perspective on violence, thus challenging any simplistic and limiting definition of the term that only engage with its physical manifestations.

Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* (1994) and *Blasphemy* (1998) have greater connotations in this context as the author portrays the vulnerable conditions of women in Pakistan in both these texts. Durrani, by speaking of her own violent marriage, situates the women in Pakistan's elite social life and gives a crucial insight on the vulnerable situation of women in the subcontinent. Her autobiography, *My Feudal Lord*, ceases to be a mere personal account and becomes a critique of wider social pattern of patriarchy and an exposure of the misinterpretation of religion by the feudal lords who justify the maltreatment and oppression of women in the name of religion. As depicted by Durrani, domestic violence permeates almost all strata of societies

across the globe, the only variant being the number and the degree of abuse. In her article "Woman, Society and Religion: Tehmina Durrani's *Quest For Identity*", K Nirupa Rani rightly points out:

In addition to collecting data on variations on cruelty and atrocities on women Durrani has created knowledge and made social judgments about the acceptability of that knowledge and advocated social change to benefit women in oppressed contexts and closed cultures. Her works are basic and applied, theoretical and practical, abstract and compellingly concrete.... Tehmina has provided extraordinary insights into the vulnerable position of women caught in the complex web of Muslim society. The complex issues involved like social conflict, micropolitics of power, domination of sexual differences etc., intersect in vivid experiences of the protagonists. The focus is on 'difference feminism' which opposes the pervasive ways of the patriarchal culture. (46-47)

*My Feudal Lord* is a burning account of Durrani's traumatic and brutal marital life with Gulam Mustafa Khar, the renowned "Sher-e-Punjab". Tehmina, born in an elite Pakistani family, got married to her first husband, Anees Khan, at the age of seventeen but the marital bliss did not last long. Then she met Gulam Mustafa Khar at a party, the "second most powerful politician in the whole of Pakistan" (20). Mustafa's "authoritarian, conservative and overpowering" (39) magnetic personality captivated her feminine sensibility. She was hypnotized by "his glittering eyes, like those of a cobra ready to strike" (19) and "was drawn to him like a moth in the flame" (21). Mustafa, despite being married to another woman at that time, had a roaring affair with Tehmina which totally mesmerized her. Later he proposed marriage to her and she, in order to be socially acceptable in the high circle, agreed. The "gracious and rational" (64) and the 'ideal lover' Mustafa in his post-marriage days was a horrifying revelation to his new wife:

The awareness that has been growing slowly now blossomed into full and ghastly flower. I had fallen into a 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 enormous amount of significance attached to marriage in Pakistan and the breakup of conjugal ties being recognized as the "reflection of a woman's failure" (29) accounts for an oft-asked question as to why Durrani persisted through such an abusive relationship or why she repeatedly fell into the snare of living with Mustafa. The victim, herself, gives the answer. She writes- "Escape was not an option. He would take the children. He would take the money. He might even take my life" (168). Mustafa's treachery and male chauvinistic attitudes were pretty obvious from the very beginning when he severely thrashed pregnant Tehmina on the suspicion of her responding sexually to her first husband, and all this happened in the holy month of Ramadan when a husband is not supposed even to talk loudly to his wife:

Suddenly he threw me down...he slapped me in the face repeatedly with his open palm, forehand and backhand. The sound of his blows seemed too loud to remain confined to the four walls of the room. I fought to stifle my screams as 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 the floor... he threw me against a wall, picked me up and threw me against another one-again, and again, and again. I no longer knew what was happening... then the pain merged into one deep, enthralling sense of agony. (102-103)

Thus Mustafa very cunningly exercises his total control over her reducing her to the level of an object. He now possesses the victim totally by viciously colonizing her both physically and mentally. Tehmina is battered, beaten blue and black, raped, mentally abused by her feudal lord. Her body becomes the site of control- she becomes 'barefoot and pregnant' again and again. Body has always been an important site for feminist discourse. Female body is most often rendered "docile" under the domination of patriarchy. It becomes primarily a source of social control in an andocentric social

order. Cowering under patriarchal dominion and subjugation, it is never free. The body thus becomes the “practical direct locus of social control” (Bordo, 2362).

Tehmina’s supposedly very sophisticated and educated family chooses to overlook her predicament. The tradition of getting married and living under the belief of parting the husband’s house only in a coffin under any circumstances is a paradigm that is almost an implicit law in Pakistan. In such societies even contemplating divorce is blasphemy and a “divorcee ... is a prime target for malicious gossips. Wagging tongues and leering glances...” (85). She becomes a “reflection of a woman’s failure” (29). These kinds of opinions and the fear of being unaided prevent Tehmina from deserting Mustafa. In the absence of familial support and the prerogatives and privileges which come along with marriage, Tehmina voluntarily accepts a subaltern position just to remain married and be socially acceptable as a woman. She knows, “...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”....A feudal lord loves his land only in functional terms. He encloses it and protects it. If it is barren, he neglects it” (107). This makes Tehmina perceive her physical, sexual and emotional assault as her inevitable destiny. The situation turns worse when Mustafa begins seducing Adila, her younger sister. He tells blatant lies to her regarding his illicit relationship and subjects his legally wedded wife to unimaginable humiliation:

This episode would cripple my spirits- perhaps beyond salvation. From this moment forward, it would be nearly impossible for me to function as an individual. There was not an iota of self-esteem left. The shame has burned it down to ashes. I was exposed as nothing. (165)

Physical violence was just the tip of the iceberg that formed the huge mountain of violence hidden, as it were, under an ocean of silence which Tehmina had created for herself as a sort of masochistic defense-mechanism. Psychological violence included all the tactics (e.g., jeering at her, raping her almost publicly, stripping her) designed by her feudal lord

to undermine her self-confidence. The renowned theorist Antonio Gramsci refers to the twin foci of “hegemony”, the coercive control and the consensual control. It is a dual manoeuvre, re-acquainted and re-negotiated continuously in accordance with the requisites, to make the person on the receiving end feel content and normal in his/her minor position (Singh, 134). Subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not only because they are physically or mentally induced to do so but also because sometimes they have reasons of their own. Coercive control is manifested through direct threats whereas consensual control arises when individuals voluntarily assimilate the view of the more powerful. This is exactly how Mustafa would carry out his game plan. One moment he would heap insults and threats on Tehmina and beat her up, while he would beg forgiveness on another. As a victim, the author is left “confused by the unaccountable pity” (104). Mustafa’s manipulation is so well devised that Tehmina starts rationalizing his unforgiving actions and his anomalous conduct as normal- “He fell at my feet and wept. I am sorry; I am sorry; he wailed. “what have I done to you?” He begged forgiveness. He said that he must have been possessed by an evil spirit. He had not meant to hurt me” (104). Finally she decides to rebel. Though the price she paid for this decision was extremely high, (as a Muslim woman seeking a divorce, she signed away all financial support, lost the custody of her four children, and found herself alienated from her friends and disowned by her parents), yet she found an identity of her own.

*The Circle of Karma*, written by the Bhutanese writer Kunzang Choden, traces the history of a woman’s struggle for space in social structure, against hegemonic control and oppression. It questions the notion of patriarchy, subjugation of a woman’s life to her sexual functions, and the guilt which society induces in her when she demands freedom or thinks of her own emotional needs. The external world seeks to construct notions of femininity, virtue and morality and circumscribe a woman’s role in the society from a male perspective. Choden’s text, thus, situates gender in relation to other intersecting factors that

constitute female subjectivity. The female self, in order to emerge in its own right, has first to validate her existence on her own terms, without male protection and support. A woman does not necessarily or automatically grow into a Self. As Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex*- "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other" (16). She thus becomes the second sex, the gendered subaltern residing at the periphery in an androcentric culture. *The Circle of Karma* articulates a woman's experience of her life in a patriarchal society and her attempt towards finding an identity of her own. The protagonist deconstructs the concept of personhood in order to reconstruct it as inclusive of woman.

The story line is simple, not burdened with many twists and turns and rendered with a voice of authenticity. It is the story of Tsomo's becoming a woman- "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 301). As a child in a lower middle class Bhutanese family she is bound by gender constructs. Though she is the eldest daughter of a gomchen, a religious scholar, she is not allowed to study- "You are a girl. You are different. You learn other things that will make you a good woman and a good wife. Learn to cook, weave and all those things. A woman does not need to know how to read and write", Father says quietly but sternly when she asks him to teach her" (21). The birthmark on Tsomo's knee indicates her thirst for knowledge, her desire to travel and to know the world. But bound by such social and cultural constructs how far can she go? Her mother smiles at the irony of the situation:

'Where is the furthest I can travel to Mother?' Tsomo asks her Mother dreamily. 'Where? I don't know. Where can a girl travel to?' Her old thoughts are stirred by the childish question. Then, gently, teasing, 'Perhaps as far north as Tibet and as far south as India.' (2)

Little Tsomo has to look after her siblings, do the fieldwork and household chores. These leave her unsatisfied and make her restless. She envies and admires the fates of her brothers who can learn religious scripts only because they have the privilege of being born as males-

She covets the company of these boys, not because she particularly likes them. But, in her eyes, the boys in the altar room are special. They're being educated. They are being taught religion. She longs to be educated, to learn to read and write and chant those beautiful prayers like them... Being born a male already has the advantage of a better birth and now they are being helped to accumulate more merit for their next birth... Being a girl was equal to being in a bad situation. (20)

Her mind revolts at this terrible injustice. But there is no choice. She learns very soon that women by birth are doomed. It is their karmic fates that have made them females:

All she can do is to bury her dream of learning religion deeper and deeper, until it becomes a distant unfulfilled dream. If only she had been born a boy- but she had not accumulated enough virtue to be born a boy. Her misgivings at the disparity began to be slowly replaced by the common lament, 'I am only a woman.' She keeps repeating this phrase in every situation where she thinks it is applicable. She repeats it like a mantra until she begins to believe that many things in life are different for women and men. The older women approve of her newfound wisdom and often encourage her, 'Yes, we are women, Tsomo. We are different. We must be less ambitious and more subdued. We are not like the men'. (23)

Passing from one stage to another, she understands that a woman has almost no choices or very few choices of her own. The novel reconstructs aspects of woman's experience and attempts to give voice to 'muted' ideologies, registering resistance. Tsomo remains silent. Whether in the presence of the father or her husbands, she is not encouraged to talk. Silence implies the traditional expectation that the women will silently fall into the role strait-jacketed for them. It thus becomes the metaphor for submission and loss of identity.

After her mother's death, Tsomo undertakes a journey to light the lamps at the altars for the peace of the departed soul. It is on this journey that she meets Wangchen, a young man already married. She returns to her village pregnant

but Wangchen leaves his first wife and marries her admitting the paternity of her unborn child. But her karmic actions and her fate, as she believes by now, are against her. She delivers a stillborn child. Her body takes an odd shape because of her protruding belly which is the result of a disease that remains untreated. She loses her grace and whatever position she had in her family. Wangchen abuses her mentally, verbally and physically and courts her younger sister Kesang in her presence which degrades her completely:

He had begun to hit her regularly. His temper flared over the littlest of irritations and every word Tsomo uttered caused him annoyance beyond control.... Her right cheek was bruised and sore and she had a black eye that was numb and heavy....Tsomo endured his beatings in silence, after all he was a man and she was only a woman. (92)

*The Circle of Karma* thus becomes a critique of wider social pattern of patriarchy and an exposure of the maltreatment and oppression of women in the name of social custom. Thus Choden articulates and authenticates the female experiences inscribed on the female body. Even Dechen Choki's stepfather raped and molested her because they depended on him for their survival:

He put his arms around me and touched me all over. I was disgusted and repulsed but I became immobile when he was around. I was frightened but couldn't do anything. I could smell the sweat on his body and the alcohol on his breath as he molested me. Even now I can recall the smell and it makes me sick and my consciousness scatters. From that day on he took every opportunity to sexually molest me in secret and abuse and humiliate me in public. He made fun of the way I looked, walked, talked and ate. He called me "that whore". (108)

She faces the same humiliations even after escaping from her home. The pictures remain the same in spite of change of place, characters or situations. Like Tsomo, this young girl, too, joins the work at the constructional site to earn a living. The Lajab, under

whom they work, takes advantage of her helplessness:

The Lajab had been playing but she had not been a willing participant in his play. She had been forced, she had been raped. She had no words to describe what had happened to her...So this was Wangchen? A violation of the body and spirit? .... Although Dechen Choki was the victim, Tsomo grew feverish with anger, could women not even have control over their own bodies? (121)

Dechen is raped repeatedly and she turns into almost a stone out of fear and humiliation. Silence becomes the ultimate reality when the bodies are subjugated and self-dignity is mutilated. Choden's writing seeks to express what has been submerged and suppressed. Until and unless women gain their bodily rights, the male-female equation is bound to be tilted and lop-sided. Luce Irigaray rightly claims that- "It is important for us to guard and keep our own bodies and at the same time make them emerge from the silence and subjugation" (421). But considering the helpless situation of these hapless women in a society where women are regarded as mere commodities, how can this 'control over one's own body' be possible? The Lajab's wife accuses Dechen Choki of stealing her husband from her, just as Tsomo had done in case of Kesang or Lhatu's young wife. The patriarchal set-up moulds the mindset of women in such a way that they think that the enemy is within, they never question the role of the men in these cases- "...women always look for the enemy within, among themselves and let men get away with a smirk on their faces, reinforcing their confidence that it is their right to do as they please, because they are men" (269).

Set against the backdrop of three decades of anti-Soviet jihad, civil war, Taliban tyranny and the post-Taliban reconstruction in Afghanistan, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, published in 2007, is the second book of fiction by the renowned novelist Khaled Hosseini. Undoubtedly, it can be crowned as a classic that puts the violence, fear, hope, and faith of this country in poignant expressions. The first chapter begins with Mariam, the illegitimate daughter of Jalil who is one of the wealthiest men of

Heart. Cast out of Jalil's mansion, Nana, Mariam's mother, lives with her in a "kolba" at the outskirts of Herat while Jalil lives in town with his three wives and nine "legitimate" children. Deceived by Jalil and wanting desperately to be a part of his family, Mariam goes to meet him in town on her fifteenth birthday. He refuses to see her, and she ends up sleeping outside his house throughout the cold wintry night. A series of tragic incidents that follow immediately afterwards change the course of her life forever. Mariam returns home to find that her mother has committed suicide and is forced by Jalil and his family to marry a stranger within a few days. At 15, she thus gets married to Rasheed, a hoarse voiced, thick-bellied shoemaker from Kabul who is older to her by 25 years-"His nails were yellow-brown, like the inside of a rotting apple, and some of the tips were curling, lifting" (49). Though traumatized by the turn her life has taken, she tries her level best to adapt to whatever life has to offer her. Mariam conceives repeatedly but it gets miscarried each time and Rasheed grows increasingly brutal. Staying in the same house with her husband becomes a trauma for her:

Mariam was afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not. (89)

Hosseini gives a powerful and realistic portrayal of a patriarchal social structure where society forces motherhood as a social obligation on women and giving birth to male children becomes mandatory. Rasheed forces Mariam to wear a "burqa" and treats her with scorn and ridicule, "walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat" (89). *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has alerted millions of readers to the horrors endured by Afghan women. In an interview to Alden Mudge Hosseini acknowledged:

The writer side of me wants what every writer wants: that people respond to my characters, to feel their happiness and sorrow, and to be transported by them.

Then there's the other side of me. I am from Afghanistan. And although it's not my intention to educate people about Afghanistan, I do hope that in some ways this novel gives people a window into Afghanistan, especially into the difficult existence of Afghan women over the last 30 years. Maybe this novel will give some identity to the nameless, faceless women in burqa walking down the street, so that a reader will now sense that these are real people who have dreams and hopes and disappointments. Just like everybody else. ([http://www.bookpage.com/0706bp/khale\\_d\\_hosseini.htmlv](http://www.bookpage.com/0706bp/khale_d_hosseini.htmlv))

Her plight turns even worse by the arrival of the orphaned Laila. Kabul is bombarded by rocket attacks and Laila finds her life traumatized when a missile rocket turns her house into debris killing both her parents. After the bombardment, Laila is taken in by Rasheed and Mariam. Recovering from her injuries, she discovers that she is pregnant with Tariq's child and learns that Tariq has supposedly died from injuries sustained in a rocket attack near the Pakistan border. She agrees to marry Rasheed, convinced that she and her baby will never survive alone on the streets of Kabul. As Rasheed says, cheerfully, that there aren't many options left for the 14-year-old girl except to marry him: "She can leave. I won't stand in her way. But I suspect she won't get far. No food, no water, not a rupia in her pockets, bullets and rockets flying everywhere. How many days do you think she'll last before she's abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit? Or all three?" (192). Thus, by a strange trick of fate, 14-years-old Laila is married to white-haired Rasheed, senior to her by forty-six years. She gives birth to a beautiful daughter, Aziza, which makes Rasheed suspicious and abusive. Under Taliban administration women are denied of their basic human rights and they are thrust into a state of imprisonment, both physical and mental. Living a life of abject slavery, they have no importance in Taliban eyes except bringing up children, satisfying male sexual needs and attending daily housework. Though Mariam and Laila plan to run away from Rasheed and leave Kabul, they are caught



at the bus station because the Taliban had imposed complete ban on women's activity outside their homes unless accompanied by a *mahram* (close male relative such as a father, brother or husband). The text makes the readers feel a sense of empathy for the Afghans, and more specifically for the Afghan women, on whom the effects of war and extremism have been devastating. Needless to say, tears roll down our eyes as we read this saga of pain and love; each face behind the "burqa" emerges as an individual with her own pains and sorrows. Hosseini gives them a face, a name. The terse, penetrating language voicing the 'herstories', the meta-narratives of the lives of Mariam and Laila, from a woman's viewpoint makes this novel a class of its own.

To conclude, we may say that the dreams of women and their struggles may differ but their desire to breathe in free air remains the same. When one moves across culture, similar problem can be seen surfacing everywhere. In narrating the plight of characters, the novelists narrate their nations. The socio-political injustice and gender discrimination go together to make these texts the moving tales of suffering humanity. The contexts define the texts and in fact, become the texts. The interface between them makes all the works immensely readable.

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