



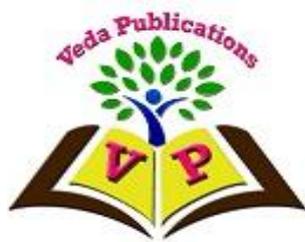
## SUBVERSING THE CULTURAL AND GENDER NORMS: TEHMINA DURRANI'S *MY FEUDAL LORD*

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on Tehmina Durrani's autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord*, analysing the cultural and gender constructions, which are the source of women's exploitation and their subjugation in a traditional society. It studies how the novelist is forced to encounter the brutal treatment by her husband. She faces the physical, sexual and psychological violence at her husband's house. Yet at the end of the novel, the novelist gets ready to subvert all the cultural and gender roles assigned to her. Towards the end of the novel, she no longer remains a passive, subordinated person, rather by divorcing her husband in a conservative society, she proves herself to be an autonomous person having an identity of her own.



#### Article Info:

Article Received 01/03/2016

Revised on: 26/03/2016

Accepted on: 29/03/2016

**Keywords:** *Autobiography, Patriarchy, Subordination, Subversion, Suppression.*

#### Citation:

**APA** Kaur, R (2016) Subversing the Cultural and Gender Norms: Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 3(1), 130-134.

**MLA** Kaur, Rajpal "Subversing the Cultural and Gender Norms: Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*" *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL* 3.1(2016):130-134.

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Born in an influential family of Pakistan in 1953, Tehmina Durrani is a prominent woman writer of Pakistan who has expressed her experiences to bring forth the miserable plight of women in Pakistani society. She has written an autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord* (1994), novels: *Mirror to the Blind* (1996), *Blasphemy* (1998) and *Happy Things in Sorrow Times* (2013). In all her works, she has tried to portray the subordinated and oppressed plight of women in a conservative patriarchal society. Her father Shakirullah Durrani was the ex-Governor of

the State Bank of Pakistan and former Chairman of Pakistan International Airlines. Her mother belonged to the Hayat family of Khattar Tribe. Tehmina firstly married Anees Khan, a junior executive in the National Shipping Corporation of Pakistan, whom she divorced.

Her autobiography *My Feudal Lord*, is the vivid description of the life of Durrani's second husband Mustafa Khar, the ex-Prime Minister and ex-Chief Minister of the State of Punjab in Pakistan, his



married life with his five ex-wives and his married life with his sixth wife Tehmina Durrani.

The present paper focuses on Tehmina Durrani's autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord*, analysing the cultural and gender constructions, which are the source of women's exploitation and their subjugation in a traditional society. It studies how the novelist is forced to encounter the brutal treatment by her husband. She faces the physical, sexual and psychological violence at her husband's house. Yet at the end of the novel, the novelist gets ready to subvert all the cultural and gender roles assigned to her. Towards the end of the novel, she no longer remains a passive, subordinated person, rather by divorcing her husband in a conservative society, she proves herself to be an autonomous person having an identity of her own.

In society the institutions like patriarchy, family, feudalism etc. work as various power structures, which oppress the weaker sections of the society and they become the root cause of their exploitation. Valerie Bryson in *Feminist Political Theory* opines:

According to Millett, 'Patriarchy's chief institution is the family', and many other radical feminists have agreed that, contrary to the assumptions of conventional political theory, the family is indeed a central part of society's power structure; as such it both sustains patriarchal power in the 'public' world and is itself a source of women's oppression. (175-176)

These power structures present their treatment with the other sections of the society as natural and not man-made, as Bryson opines, "Far from being a 'natural' arrangement or individual choice based on mutual love and respect in which the emotional, sexual and domestic needs of adult partners are met and their children cared for, it is a social institution in which women's labour is exploited, male sexual power may be violently expressed and oppressive gender identities and modes of behaviour are learned (176)". The institution of marriage is based on such power structures, which deprive women the right to equality, right to get respect and lead a life according to their own wishes. The women are not only

deprived of political and legal rights, but they are culturally so nurtured that they dare not raise their voice against the male-dominance. As quoted in Habib:

According to Barkty, "Women's oppression under male domination not only consists of solely in depriving women of political and legal rights but also extends into the structure of our society and the contents of our culture and permeates our consciousness".(92)

In a conservative society of Pakistan, majority of the cases of marriage are not based on mutual understanding, love and care; rather they become a source of degrading women, abusing them due to lack of their economic and biological weakness. In such societies, the conservative laws and the prevalence of feudalism are the major causes of women's exploitation and oppression. Durrani's novel *My Feudal Lord* provides the description of such a society, as in the words of Srivastava:

*My Feudal Lord* (1995) is the true archetype of women's plight and their repressed condition. It has been written unambiguously and specifically in Pakistani context referring to the plight of women in patriarchal symbolic order. Durrani's work illustrates that in third world countries like Pakistan, women are taken as personal properties and possessions of men since men control every sphere of lives of women even their behaviour and movements. (159)

In the novel *My Feudal Lord*, Tehmina is apprenticed by her mother, who has a dominant personality. She wants all her children to be obedient, "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)". Her mother argues that if she is not an obedient daughter, she cannot become an ideal wife or mother. Suppressed by the dominating personality of her mother, Tehmina gets suffered from a disease called meningitis. In a Pakistani society, the woman is known with her relation with her father, husband or son; she has no identity of her own. Women have to obey the male members of the family. She does not get succeeded in developing a



personality. In a woman's life, the only goal is getting married:

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)

The girls are not permitted to go outside the house or talk to the strangers. They are not allowed to have love-affair with anyone. Men are free to do anything they like; however, women are not free to live according to their own wishes. Women are completely excluded from the political, social grounds, only men dominate these spheres. This tendency is called "double standard" which is defined by Mary Ellen Snodgrass in her *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature* as:

**Double standard** – The codification of laws, rules, and social expectations for women forces on half the world's population a more stringent regulation based solely on gender. . . In planning a home for their new wives, the men project a welcoming place where their mates anticipate the men's needs, serve their favorite foods, and tend to laundry and cleaning without male involvement. More dismaying to the female citizens . . . is the prevalent male attitude toward child rearing, which society thrusts upon women and demands that they enjoy despite the martyrdom and isolation of day-to-day responsibility for socializing, disciplining, and educating each new addition to the family. (150)

If the woman does not act according to the wishes of the cultural and societal norms, she is conditioned to do so. She is made subservient through physical violence, suppression and trepidation. An authoritative, dominating and conservative husband is considered ideal. Very honestly Tehmina confesses that she falls into the trap of Mustafa Khar, "That Mustafa was authoritarian, conservative and overpowering I knew from the start – but that was precisely what attracted me so much. Psychologically I had suffered from my

father's weak role in our family. Now here was someone who presented a quite different personality (39)". After marriage, Mustafa imposes many restrictions upon Tehmina. He confines her into the four walls of his house and cuts her from the whole world.

Tehmina is physically assaulted, sexually humiliated and psychologically traumatised by Mustafa. As a consequence, she has to consult a doctor for serious eye and ear injuries:

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)

This becomes the daily habit of Mustafa to batter her. Even a slight mistake or delay is not tolerated by him. It results in violent beating. He cannot tolerate any disobedience from her at any cost, "Never – ever – disobey me! You have to do what I tell you to do (95)." He locks her into the four walls of his house and cuts her from the entire world. If she wants to go out, she can go by wearing a *Burka*.

Moreover, Mustafa emotionally blackmails Tehmina so that she may not raise her voice against him or his family. He says that by doing so, the people will ridicule her and their family will be dishonoured. They would not respect her and do not consider her a good wife:

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)

Tehmina thinks it to be a private matter of husband and wife. So she keeps her silence. She is



convinced with the distorted version of Koran, "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)". In this way, men use religion to endorse his opinion about the women's role in family or society. Religion is misinterpreted and distorted version is provided to women to make them subjugated. She feels herself to be trapped, "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)". Women are taught that they get respect in the society only when they are married, a divorced woman does not get respect in society. In Pakistani society divorced woman is considered unrespectable, "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)". In spite of the tyrannical behaviour of her husband, a Pakistani woman always try to save her marriage and does not want to be a divorcee, "I had to keep my marriage together for the sake of my children and myself. I had invested too much pain and compromise in this relationship to let it go now (217)". The social conditioning of women works to such an extent that the treatment they face, they think to be their destiny. But there is excess of everything. Tehmina suffers a lot, and whenever she decides to leave her husband, she is brought back to her home by her husband very cleverly. Once she challenges:

'If you are Mr Khar, I am Mrs Khar. If you learned from Mr Bhutto, I have learned from you. If you blackmail me, I'll blackmail you. I will face up to the situation and fight you just as you are fighting me. I will not let you get away with it!' (244)

She finally decides to divorce her husband but she is forced to get back to her husband, as an ideal wife does not leave her husband in misery. When Mustafa got imprisoned, he very manipulatively stopped being a repentant husband and became an ideal politician, who did not afraid of being assassinated and made her to be faithful to his

cause. She is socially conditioned to be a good wife, so she gets agreed, "I fell suddenly in love with a noble idea – the return of the exiled leader (252)". She is convinced by Mustafa to be by his side, "The words I had written on the Koran haunted me: 'I will stand by Mustafa through his incarceration be it for life.' (292)". By campaigning for her husband for a long time, she gets succeeded in getting him free. However, Mustafa does not even appreciate her for her efforts. On the contrary, he resumes his affair with Adila, Tehmina's sister. When she opposes their illicit relations, Mustafa declares Tehmina to be a mentally sick person:

'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)

Thus she is proved mentally sick by Mustafa, when she has tried to disapprove the illicit relations of Mustafa and her sister. She gets double the punishment when she prevents him from exploiting her sister. Whenever she has tried to get divorce from him, he does whatever he can to bring her back to him. Once, he kidnaps his own children. Another time, he locks her up in the bathroom. After being suffered for many years, Tehmina gets tired from her brutal husband. She has tried to get divorced from him, many times, and she becomes successful in the end also. However, she has to pay very heavy price for a life of independence. She has to leave the custody of all her children; she has to leave the financial assistance from her husband.

Thus, by getting divorce from her brutal husband, Tehmina Durrani has tried to subvert the traditional gender and cultural norms of the society. In the words of Susan Hekman, "What Butler advocates in lieu of feminist identity politics is 'gender trouble': engaging inactions that subvert gender identity. If 'woman' is created by the acts that define gender, then acting subversively will destabilize that identity. Such acts were Butler's prescription for feminist politics (99)". If women in society try to do those actions, which are opposite to the norms decided by the society, they are considered queer. However, by taking inspiration from them, others may also follow their example. Thus the existing norm or societal rule gets changed



gradually. This is what Butler's theory of performativity says. Subversion of an existing norm is the only method to make oneself get accepted.

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