

Tehmina Durrani and the Politics of Literary Controversy

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Abstract:

Literary controversies arise to restrict the intended content of a literary work due to various reasons as politics, sex, caste and religion, and therefore the study of literary controversies become urgent in context of its relation to individual and society. This article attempts to reflect upon the mechanisms existing in society of Pakistan that prevent the expression of dominant socio-cultural reality by female writers along with the bearing of these mechanisms on female writer's freedom of expression. For the purpose, the paper specifically studies the literary controversy associated with Tehmina Durrani's autobiography *My Feudal Lord*. Its publication takes the country by storm; the system tries to choke the writer's voice by imposing a ban when it finds she has revealed publically the reality of her battered and bruised married life at the hands of politically influential feudal husband. This paper discusses the bearing of literary controversy on the society of Pakistan along with its contribution to the female cause. It foregrounds the efficacy and impact of controversies on society in relation to culture and gender, which develops an understanding of the controversies related to women writing. The paper also reflects on whether the controversies affect and affront the established structure of a society.

Keywords: Literary controversy, Censorship, Gender, My Feudal Lord, Tehmina Durrani

The literary controversies, being as stormy and commonplace as the peaceful literary discourse deserve scholastic consideration. Literary controversies become a source of knowledge for people as it create better understanding of the work and have the potential to move people to action and to change. A literary work of art turns controversial and generates conflict when a hegemonic social group of society feels that the work does not confirm to

their particular ideology and poses a threat to the established canon. It calls for a ban on the book and sometimes for the execution of the author as in the case of controversy behind the text *The Satanic Verses* (1988) by Salman Rushdie. Literary controversy, being not a new phenomenon contains a long history of banned texts and authors worldwide, such as the books *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J.D. Salinger, *The Anarchist Cookbook* (1971) by William Powell and many other authors who belong to last century like Oscar Wilde, Dan Brown, Taslima Nasreen, Ismat Chughtai, and Arundhti Roy. Many a time controversial literature is subjected to ban and other censoring practices. There are different reasons behind controversies; it can be the projection of offensive language, blasphemous material, sexual content, violence, religious viewpoint, racism etc. and the cause for ban gives rise to serious debates on the questions concerning freedom of speech, tradition, truth, gender, society and language.

When it comes to censorship of feminist texts, the reason can be an attempt to silence a female's public voice, so as to let the patriarchy reign conservatively in an unobstructed way. Fresh cases of gendered-based censorship from the suppression of Taslima Nasreen to death and rape threats against US feminist bloggers, points to the validity of Virginia Woolf's analysis of male attitude towards a female text. In her work *A Room of Her Own*, she questions the literary and intellectual world for their cold attitude to works written by women, and summarizes that for males to justify their authority over society they should believe that women find them superior; hence evidence of women's actual views is unwelcome (Tax 2014). The Women's World Organization for Rights, Literature and Development (Women's WORLD) described gendered-based censorship as:

"Women who write on issues of state politics are silenced by the same means used to silence men in opposition, though, in practice, even these forms of censorship are affected by gender. Gendered-based censorship aims at muting women's voice, deny validity to their experience, and exclude them from the political discourse, and prevent women writers from breaking the silence" (Tax 2014).

The actual purpose of censoring practices is to conceal the real conditions of women's lives and the biasness of patriarchal gender relations. One such case in point is of Tehmina Durrani, a best-selling writer, an artist and activist for women's rights in Pakistan, who came into light with her autobiography *My Feudal Lord* (1991), an international bestseller, which exposes and challenges the authoritative hegemonic structure. But, being a woman's work, it faces criticism, and alleged as controversial. Durrani possess a great courage and lay bare the

suffocating lives of women in Islamic society by going against the tradition. Though, the price she pays for it is very high, she succeeds in lending a voice to all other fellow women. It is the passion for reform that assists her in achieving this goal. The journey of her life inspires her to write more books. *My Feudal Lord* (1991), *Mirror to the Blind* (1996), *Blasphemy* (1998), and *Happy Things in Sorrow Times* (2013) are all a witness to the humanitarian concern of Durrani and reflect her motto for human welfare and improving the condition of the underprivileged. But as still water produces ripples after a stone is thrown into it, similarly, Durrani's autobiography *My Feudal Lord* creates ripples in Pakistani society and shakes its stability. The text, in spite of being a real life account of Tehmina Durrani leads to controversy and causes a furor across the country. Some irreverent group of people demanded for the ban and death of the author for they allege her as bold, immoral and adulteress. While the Prophet prohibits the killing of religious people, old people, as well as women and children, some fundamentalists twist and mold the Prophet's teachings to meet their ends. William Chittick expresses that, sadly like other religions, Islam has fanatics and extremists who justify their crimes by distorting Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet Mohammad for heinous ends (Chittick 93). *My Feudal Lord* holds a mirror to the devastating lives of married woman in Muslim society; the women who bear terrible torture for years under a constant fear to life and only dream of liberty. Along with misinterpretation of Islamic doctrines, males use unfair and insidious ways to control and manipulate lives of women, which draws them continuously back into the male trap and erases their identity and individuality.

Despite being born in an influential family and with high qualification, Durrani's parents preach her the lessons of perfection, submission and subordination. Women are instructed from childhood to abide by man-made principles so that no thought of going against family, husband and society springs up. This fundamentalist attitude is an evidence of the societal pattern of Pakistan and its modus operandi. By sticking to these dictates Durrani grows into a self who is alien to her own nature and is in alignment with the expectations of others. She confirms "The lesson was clear and I learnt it well: blind acquiescence was necessary to gain approval; being you earned only condemnation. I was acceptable only when I was unlike myself ... wore a mask of submission and developed a personality that was against my true nature, but compatible with my mother's. Inwardly, I became confused and sometimes ashamed that what I must really be was incorrect and unacceptable" (MFL 25). The childhood conditioning impacts and affects Durrani's life badly. Her second marriage

with Muastafa Khar turns out to be traumatic and the idea of individuality and identity slips into oblivion. She tries hard to prevent her marriage from going to rocks; a marriage in which there is no love and dignity left but only humiliation. “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, and no will of my own” (MFL 100).

Mustafa Khar is an authoritative politician with hard feudal mentality and he practices these traits over helpless people including Durrani. Thrashing and slapping become a routine as he expected obedience and any rebellion invited his brutality. Sufferings continue for about 13 years of marriage with her crafty husband. Durrani thinks of leaving him many times, but Mustafa uses deceitful ways to keep her under command and even abducts their own children to use as bait. Durrani returns for the safety and better future of the children. Even when Mustafa is jailed for more than two years due to political reasons, he uses Durrani to fight his battle for release, “through me Mustafa had scaled the prison walls” (MFL 305) and coaches her the way he would play himself in the outside world to win favor of people. No sooner he is out of jail, he resumes illicit relations with her younger sister and forgets all efforts of Durrani. When this scandal looms in the air, Durrani writes, “to divert it, my life was a very small price to pay- perhaps no price at all” (MFL 358). Mustafa was now the second most powerful leader in the party, next to Benazir and easily reaches to a position that could effortlessly get him on the top in the power politics (MFL 366). The female is just used as a ladder in political sphere and her contribution is ignored, which relates the controversy to political opportunism. Manipulative leaders like Mustafa fear social deceit leading to their political downfall and therefore, try to mute the voice of Durrani by declaring her life-story as controversial, since it exposes brutal feudal lords, commanding and hypocritical politicians of Muslim society, who fear the shattering of kingdom of patriarchy which reigns on the silence of women. Durrani’s situation reflects the multiple fears and ties of a married woman that subjugate her and halt her self-development. She dreams of liberty but:

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).

Gradually, she gathers self-confidence and courage and rebels many times to find her way out of the terrible marriage. Divorce is final, the spirit is free, but the consequences befall her in the future. Everyone including her parents, husband and society, all sideline her, “I was a social and political outcast” (MFL 372). Two years after the divorce, Durrani comes

out with her autobiography, an honest account of her abusive marriage with champion of feudalism. The publication of *My Feudal Lord* in Pakistan is welcomed with words like scandalous, pornographic and obscene. Two criminal charges are registered against Durrani and she writes “One charged me with treason and other charged me with adultery ... The latter being an offence punishable with death by stoning under the Haddood Ordinance” (MFL 381). For detailing her married life publicly, parents and relatives abandon her. *Express Tribune* writes that her family, who hails from Khyber- Pakhtunkhwa, shunned her for 13 years after the book, which was initially banned in Pakistan (Naveed Web. 2016). Durrani’s resolution and reason to write *My Feudal Lord* become clear when she states that in her closed society it is disgraceful for a woman to reveal her intimate secrets, but silence is a crime, which condones injustice and promotes hypocrisy, therefore “I decided to cast a stone at hypocrisy and expose the camouflage” (MFL 375). The book mirrors the tale of sufferings of women; the women who are forced to live a life of slavery and disrespect in their husbands’ households.

Durrani couldn’t find any publisher for her autobiography in Pakistan, until she meets Najam Sethi, the managing editor and publisher of *The Friday Times*. Even then as a legal precaution, the publisher's name appears nowhere in the book, and Jugnu Mohsin, wife of Najam Sethi is named as the publisher (Popham 1999). The incident lights Virginia Woolf’s writing of the women “who had to hide their art through pseudonyms or through the pages of other’s books” (Snaith 19). When finally, the first edition of the book comes out in 1990, it receives extremely negative reviews and a ban is imposed, because for the first time a woman in Pakistan writes about expounders of male supremacy and denounces their hidden mentality that firmly believes in female suppression. It reflects that freedom of expression is not a solitary affair but is controlled by certain socio-cultural forces. Stanley Fish in his book *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech and it’s a Good Thing, Too*, has argued that free speech is not an independent value but a political prize, and if that prize has been captured by a politics which is in opposition to yours, it becomes a hindrance in fulfilling goals, because most speech is governed in relation to cultural norms and expectations (Fish 102).

A nation’s engagement to freedom of expression can be measured in terms of its treatment of two groups of people: one who has no voice with inferior status, and other who defines and forces the limits of expression and speech. In Pakistan, literary controversy can be linked to socio-cultural, political, religious and sexual practices. Mushtaq Bilal puts, “Since Pakistan is an extremely conservative and intolerant society in terms of religion, rights

of women and one's sexual orientation, exercising freedom of expression remains a perilous undertaking" (Bilal 2016). Durrani in her autobiography notes that she doesn't think Pakistan was ready for someone like her and had attracted mammoth enemies as she took on the entire feudal system (Naveed Web. 2016). This shows that when it comes to female expression of male, cultural pattern of society operates distinctively so as to marginalize and silence the female self. It allows for the understanding of the reason behind controversy, which points it to be a gendered-based controversy since a female goes against the tide and gives a hard blow to the traditional feudal system of Pakistan and offends it. This state affirms the cogency of Fish's argument that the realm of expression rests on the ability of some persons to interpret principles and doctrines and this interpretation decides whether they want the speech to be heard or silenced (Fish 110). Once Durrani interrupts the hierarchy, agents of silence become active and attempt to exclude the writer and erase the threatening writing from the literary domain. And the misinterpretation of Islamic doctrines become justification for selfish acts of males who assert that every woman divorcing and stripteasing her married life deserves same treatment. The attempts are made to pulverize any female voice rising against ideological society, clearly because they treat woman as inferior to man. Forces of silence do the job through illegal ways, and adorn Durrani with words like opportunist and immoral, which mark the attempts to attack a person on the basis of gender, since a woman explicitly dares to challenge the ideals by producing unconventional account of violence of male over female. Sree, in her book *Alien Among Us* states that the society to which Durrani belongs is dominated by Muslim patriarchs and the woman is relegated to the secondary, rather inferior rung in the ladder of importance, intellectually and socially (Sree 29). Durrani's own married life with Mustafa is an insight into a first-hand glimpse of the miserable situation of women in a feudal world where man's fist do the talking.

The literary controversy associated with *My Feudal Lord* turns toward a greater good, no doubt for writer there are traumatic consequences in personal life, all alone, disowned by family and marginalization. In a talk in Lahore Literary Festival, Durrani tells that the women of her family- close and extended were forbidden from meeting her, "they would say no one would marry their daughters (if they meet me)" (Shaukat Web. 2013). Her story is acknowledged internationally, attracts readers from all around the globe, read by males and females and become a universal story of the sufferings and abuse that women face. *Asian Times*, UK writes "A woman's story that shook Pakistan" and reports Durrani as the first

Pakistani woman to challenge the mighty bastion of establishment sexism in her country (Govender 2015).

Sometimes banning of the books leads to a threat to writer's life, and becomes a serious concern in relation to a person's right to life, security and speech. In Durrani's case people demand that she should be stoned to death, a certain defined group try to decide the course of her life, which hints at fiend like disposition of the predominant. Srinivas Aravamudan in his article "Fables of Censorship" suggests for the disjuncture between the writers and the texts they produce and says, "even as the Fatwa's threat to assassinate should be vigorously opposed as a criminal incitation, or conspiracy" (Aravamudan 328). Literary controversy on banning of *My Feudal Lord* shows the reality of the patriarchal Islamists, what they are and what they do, when their truth is brought into light by a feminist advocate and also fosters a debate over free speech and gender treatment. It proves the validity of Fish's statement in which he argues that deliberation is cultural and because it is cultural the outcome of deliberation cannot help being influenced by whatever notions are current in the culture (Fish 118). The research on controversy related to the book uncovers that the structure of Pakistani society operates on the agency of patriarchy, politics and male chauvinism in order to restrict the female potential and her freedom of expression. These social forces impinge upon the life of a woman severely and crush her individuality and creativity. The expectations and constraints placed on her because of her gender make her to seek fulfillment in domesticity, obedience and silence, which results in her disappearance from the main stream.

The controversy crops up to target and affect gender, so as to suppress female self, while the role and power of gender, here, of a woman writer in subverting the social structure is highlighted in this process. Durrani's writing comes to her rescue; she uses it to recover rather than to just write and also urges other women, bearing the same to participate in, to quote the words of Virginia Woolf "recuperative project" (Snaith 19). The power of female written words and their meaning and understanding when operate in different culture and gender is revealed. This interplay of controversy, ideology and gender contribute to a better understanding behind writing of *My Feudal Lord*. The reader becomes aware of the existence of inhumanity of certain group of people over women and of the dreadful lives of women of Pakistan along with their cultural struggles, and hopes for a worldwide collective action against inequality and oppression.

While on the one hand, the controversy and banning of *My Feudal Lord* in Pakistan display the urgency of female issues to be heard; on the other hand it is an evidence of the damage it could do to its reigning hierarchies. Ban is imposed by and for the benefit of the particular group i.e. male, in order to downgrade the female and continue the hierarchy of meliority and dominance. But in a larger context, the controversy resulted by *My Feudal Lord* has a positive bearing on society with regard to gender. The literary controversy brings a tumult in patriarchal world, as the truth of male authority is revealed. It informs the cross-cultural reader of the significance and consequences of the literary endeavor of the female writers who are engaged in women's struggle.

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