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Aesthetic Consciousness in Tehmina Durrani's My Feudal Lord

Abstract

Literature is a source of appreciation of the beauty of life and its experiences as described by Rebeca West: "Literature must be an analysis of experience and a synthesis of the findings into a unity" (qtd. in Huff). Thus, literature glorifies the aesthetic sense of a piece of work and appreciates its beauty and its uniqueness: "As an art, literature is the organisation of words to give pleasure; through them it elevates and transforms experience; through them it functions in society as a continuing symbolic criticism or values" (Rexroth). Feminist scholarship which also affects philosophical writing has developed two specific areas: one which involves the use of female body as in performance art and the other in the representation of women as objects of beauty in contrast to age-old concept established by male artists, in which women are depicted as passive, silent, voiceless and willing sources of sexual gratification and pleasure. Feminist aesthetics have themselves made their bodies as an instrument to challenge the historical oppression, and have taken up the charge and control over depiction of themselves and that too, within a profoundly distinct vantage ground. Thus, a new awareness among women related to their bodies due to feminist aestheticism have led to usher a completely new concept of beauty and also, various new uses of female body in subverting the past oppression. Thus, feminist aesthetics has led feminism to another level, as they see female body as a source of acquiring power and potential rather than confining it to a mere thing of beauty and passivity. In this paper an attempt is made to highlight how

Tehmina Durrani in her autobiography *My Feudal Lord: A Devastating Indictment of Women's Role in Muslim Society* has over turned the power structures prevalent in Pakistani society. Besides, she has beautifully portrayed how she transformed her self completely from a passive and voiceless woman who was only valued for her physical beauty to a respectable person having an independent identity.

Keywords: Islamic Feminism, Power, Sexuality, Violence, Identity

Aestheticism is derived from Greek word *aisthesthai* which is further derived from *aistheta* which means “to perceive”. The term was popularised in English by translations of Kant and is basically “science that treats with the conditions of sensuous perception” (Hall and Ames 133). Walter Pater (1868) used the term to describe the late nineteenth century movement “arts for art’s sake”. He believed that life should be lived vividly by having an ideal of beauty. Feminism is a term which is associated with making women as subjects rather than mere objects who are held as “other” and “mysterious beings”. Women are generally rendered as passive beings who are defined and described by men and the notions of patriarchal society. Feminism thus aims to move women from periphery to centre, focussing on the experiences of women described by women themselves. However, the connection between feminist and aesthetics is not simple but a complex reaction as they have deconstructed the earlier theories of taste, beauty and sublimity which supports universal and neutral notions and concepts.

Women artists, since 1970s, have struggled to make women as serious contenders in the male-dominated notions and standards of artwork. Feminist art critics as well as theorists have highlighted their contemporaries in a worldwide upsurge of new and cooperative women’s galleries and journals which brought feminist concerns and experiences to mainstream. Thus, the concept of feminist art eventually became an agenda to promote social and political change, usurping patriarchy and propagating equality for women. Feminist

scholarship is developed mainly in two spheres: one which involves “the self-portraiture that typically involves the use of female body e.g. in performance art; the second is tangential interest in the description of women as objects of beauty, in defiance of a tradition established by male artists for over two millennia in which women have been cast as passive, available, and willing sources of sexual satisfaction and pleasure” (Alcoff and Kittay 260). Thus, the attention women have started paying towards their bodies as well as the artistic portrayal of themselves have helped to usher a new concept of beauty and art that is contrary to the concept used earlier by male artists and authors. Thus, with the arrival of feminist concerns in aestheticism a new scope of art and beauty is generated which helps women to elevate themselves from the male-defined standards of beauty which had reduced women to a weak and domicile creatures. Thus, aesthetics has generated new meanings and connotations in relation to feminist concerns and has elevated the sense of beauty in context with female body. Feminist aesthetics derive their power from female bodies which previously were rendered only as an object of beauty and mysteries.

Tehmina Durrani (1953 -) has poured her heart out in her autobiography entitled *My Feudal Lord: A Devastating Indictment of Women's Role in Muslim Society* (1991). She has made the power of pen her strength to fight against the injustices and discriminations that women are made to face in patriarchal society. Through the process of writing, she has sought the power to overturn and shun the standards of patriarchal society that have made women as “objects” of beauty and pleasure. Her autobiography voices the hard journey of her second marriage that had reduced her to ashes and nothingness. She decided to write freely about the power relations in Pakistani society that degrades and violates basic rights of Muslim women. Her decision to write freely about her personal life and sexuality has ushered a new level of confidence and awareness among Muslim women, who otherwise have remained mostly behind the veil. Her writings have created a stir in the Muslim world where

it is strictly prohibited for women to speak about their personal life and sexuality. It is a journey of a girl from innocence to becoming a mature woman, who eventually learned to stand up for her rights and self-respect: “*My Feudal Lord*, chronicles the story of Tehmina Durrani – a girl who grows up facing a seemingly impossible challenge that girl she is! (Chhabra).

Tehmina Durrani highlights the partial power structure prevalent in Pakistani society where women are prevented from gaining power and authority by confining them to home and preventing them to go for higher studies because of the tradition of early marriage: “yet, clearly, a man was the only future available to a Pakistani girl. My role in life was to marry and to marry well” (*MFL* 28). Further, the cultural confinements are put on women by developing the notions like *izzat* (honour) which are attached with women. Thus, there exist deep-rooted prejudice and malice against women in patriarchy and early marriage prevent them from gaining education and awareness. So women are rendered ignorant throughout their lives and they are thus prevented from fighting back against such injustices. Women are expected to be modest in order to avoid family dishonouring and becoming a victim of honour killing: “[T]o avoid being shamed, women must know how to behave with propriety, as prescribed in the code of honor” (qtd. in Gupte 10). Thus, such notions depict gender-based formation of patriarchal societies where the whole concept of honour is related with women and men are free from carrying out the burden of chastity. This exhibits curbing of women’s sexuality and desires which is also an agenda of patriarchy to diminish their existence as human beings:

...in most parts of the world, sexual agency and desires of a woman generate more intense repercussions in comparison to that of a man’s. Patriarchal honor operates not just at the moment of choosing a partner but percolates into almost every moment of a woman’s life. Ultimately, the notion that women

embody men's honor is normalized and internalized in childhood by both genders. This situation is accepted as natural in society... (Gupta 1)

Tehmina Durrani as well as her mother Samina, were forced to marry early and thus, were made to shun their dreams of becoming independent women. However, fate of Tehmina Durrani was much entwisted as she decided to divorce Anees Khan after two and a half year of marriage and marry Mustafa Khar, a well known politician of Pakistan. Her life was completely changed after her divorce with Anees Khan as being a divorcee is a worst taboo in Pakistan: "A Pakistani woman will endure almost anything in order to hold a marriage together. In our society, marriage may be purgatory, but divorce is hell" (*MFL* 77). She came to know various double standards that patriarchy has set for limiting women's freedom. Mustafa Khar was a womaniser and had many wives. Thus, polygamy is also a form of violence committed on women as it limits their rights and reduces them to commodities of pleasure: "Man knows that to satisfy his desires, to perpetuate his existence, woman is indispensable to him; he has to integrate her in society: as long as she submits to the order established by males, she is cleansed of her original stain" (Beauvoir 114). Man wants his wife to be "both a servant and a companion" (115) and expects total submission of her. Thus, power structure is moulded in favour of men only and they practice their power to subjugate and subordinate women.

Tehmina Durrani has also highlighted the malice practice of *jirga* system in which feudal lords are treated as the lords and owners of their vassals. Feudal lords are called upon to hold councils in order to announce the verdict on issues like "land and property disputes, family rivalries, honour and shame, theft, kidnapping, revenge, etc" (Qaisrani et al. 19). The verdict of *jirga* allowed the victim's family to avenge on women of the perpetrator's family through "honour killings, kidnappings, vani (girl child marriage), watasatta (bride exchange),

rape, etc” (19). As a result, women have to pay the price of men’s deeds and become victim of men’s wrath. Thus, it is also a form of agenda of patriarchy to limit and confine women and keep their freedom in check. Mustafa Khar was also a feudal lord and once he was called upon to provide justice on the verdict of two lovers who had been engaged in an extramarital affair. True to his feudal blood, Mustafa Khar declared Ayesha “was the legal property of her husband” (*MFL* 26) and decided that she should be returned to her husband. Thus, this instance highlights the position of women in patriarchal society who do not have independent existence of their own, rather they are products of property for their father and husband. Further, the cruelty and hatred with which women are treated is highlighted from the fact that when Ayesha refused to return back to her husband’s house and instead pleaded to be a maid of Mustafa Khar’s house, he took it as a challenge to his supreme authority and in order to punish her, he sent her lover to an asylum where he eventually grew mad and died. Thus, the various atrocities and tortures that women are made to undergo in patriarchal society are exposed by Tehmina Durrani in *My Feudal Lord*.

Mustafa Khar was a true product of feudal cum patriarchal society as he believed that true power of a man rests in his authority on women. He used to exercise complete authority on his wives and would use violence and torture to keep them subdued. When he married Tehmina Durrani, he was still married to Sherry. He forced Tehmina Durrani to keep their marriage a secret, thus rendering Sherry in ignorance: “In his dealings with Sherry, Mustafa exhibited extreme impatience. He treated her with contempt and abused her with filthy language that made my ear burn...Mustafa kicked her in the buttocks. He pulled off his rubber-soled shoes and struck her with them. Then he roughly pushed her out of the room” (95). Further, the condition of Muslim women in Islamic countries becomes worse as they use religion as a weapon against women. Muslim men think the religion has sanctioned their superiority over women:

The men are placed in charge of the women, since God has endowed them with the necessary qualities and made them bread earners. The righteous women will accept this arrangement obediently, and will honor their husbands in their absence, in accordance with God's commands. As for the women who show rebellion, you shall first enlighten them, then desert them in bed, and you may beat them as a last resort. (qtd. in Tracy 588)

Men consider marriage as a license to treat women their servants who are obliged to tolerate their abuse and violence: "marriage gives husbands rights that strangers do not have, that is, the right to control, even violently, their wives' bodies" (589). Mustafa Khar also followed such notions regarding marriage and treated his wives inhumanely. He demanded complete obedience from his wives: "How dare you keep me waiting!...I told you to come immediately" (*MFL* 96). Thus, domestic violence and polygamy both serves as a tool to subordinate and subjugate women and degrade their position. They limit women's freedom and prevent them from getting knowledge about their rights thus checking their subordination in patriarchal world.

In spite of her torturous marriage, Tehmina Durrani endured all her sufferings silently in order to save her marital relationship and future of her children. She even sacrificed her sexual desires in order to remain in limits set by her husband as she was not allowed to express her sexual desires freely: "Mustafa did not even realize that he had crushed my sensuality" (107). Women, in feudalistic society is treated like a land and is associated with honour: "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. This was a revealing simile. A feudal lord loves his land only in functional terms. He encloses it and protects it. If it is barren, he neglects it. Land is power, prestige and property" (107). However, Tehmina Durrani's views are contrary to such prejudices as she believes in a more liberal interpretation

of the Qur'an: "Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed *more abundantly on the former than on the latter*, and with what they may spent out of their possessions" (qtd. in Barlas 185). Thus, women are subjugated through the prejudiced interpretation of the Qur'an and are thus doubly oppressed at the hands of both patriarchy as well as religion.

Tehmina Durrani "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" (*MFL* 100). She was tormented both physically as well as mentally. Mustafa Khar even kept censorship on her thinking "I became incapable of thinking logically; indeed I was afraid to think, for irrationally. He fed this fear by saying, I know what you're thinking, Tehmina, believe me. You daren't think of anything that I have forbidden you to think about. 'My brain was washed, bleached and hung out to dry'" (108). However, unlike many other women she decided to resist and fight back against injustice she met at the hands of her husband. Although she was blackmailed by Mustafa Khar not to divorce him and he also kidnapped her children, yet she was able to free herself and children from his wild clutches. She decided to write her autobiography in order to create her independent identity because she suffered identity crisis being the divorced wife of a well-known political figure: "I was a social and political outcast. People whom I formerly respected turned their backs on me. I shuddered at the realization of the position that a woman falls into after divorce – especially if her ex-husband is an important person" (372). Through the process of writing she gave answer to Mustafa Khar's derogatory remarks: "Tehmina, you are nothing any more. Once you were Begum Tehmina Mustafa Khar. Now you are just Tehmina Durrani. When you ring up people you have to introduce yourself as my ex-wife" (373-374).

Through her autobiography, Tehmina Durrani created a sense of aestheticism in Islamic feminist literature as she wrote freely about her personal life and the injustices that are commonly meant by every Muslim woman in the country as well as in the whole world. She decided to break free the stereotype related to women by remaining silent about the violence they suffered at the hands of men in their family because: “Our closed society considered it obscene for a woman to reveal her secrets, but would not silence be a greater crime? Silence condones injustice, breeds subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy. Mustafa Khar and other feudal lords thrive and multiply on silence; Muslim women must learn to raise their voices against injustice” (374-375). She proved herself a strong woman and thus, created an independent identity of her self and proved that gender stereotyping is just a social structure and had nothing to do with sex. She has used her sufferings and sexuality as a source of power and inspiration.

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