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### Quest for Self in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*

#### **Abstract:**

Tehmina Durrani's autobiography, *My Feudal Lord* (1991) is the voice of a slave breaking from her bondage. It is the story of a woman who refuses to suffer in silence for the sins committed by others. It deals with the themes of domestic violence, lust, rape, extramarital sex and betrayal which are similar to the problems that women face across cultures. The major issue in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* is the suppression of the marginal self by repressive patriarchal society. Here Durrani exposes Mustafa Khar, a powerful feudal politician who was the chief minister of the Punjab province at the time of their affair. Durrani has succeeded in changing her position from being a victim to someone who is in control of her destiny. Her experiences are of paramount importance, as they eventually paved the way for her liberation enabling her to become a political, social and feminist activist. The present paper analyzes several factors that promote the subjugation of women and examines the numerous ways by which Tehmina Durrani takes control of her own life and destiny.

**Key words:** woman, self, subjugation, patriarchy, violence.

Tehmina Durrani's autobiography, *My Feudal Lord* is the voice of a slave breaking from her bondage. It is the story of a woman who refuses to suffer in silence for the sins committed by others. It deals with the themes of domestic violence, lust, rape, extramarital sex and betrayal which are similar to the problems that women face across cultures. It analyzes the feudal element in Pakistani politics and provides an insider account of the dealings of political parties in Pakistan from a woman spectator's point of view. Durrani was aware of the dangers involved in going back to her past. Her way of accepting her own guilt without putting the entire blame on her ex-husband Mustafa Khar in her autobiography partly convinces us of its authenticity. She questions the cultural conditioning that privilege men and accepts the subjugation of women as

normal. The major issue in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* is the suppression of the marginal self by repressive patriarchal society. Here Durrani exposes Mustafa Khar, a powerful feudal politician who was the chief minister of the Punjab province at the time of their affair. The present paper analyzes several factors that promote the subjugation of women and examines the numerous ways by which Tehmina Durrani takes control of her own life and destiny.

Durrani speaks of the patriarchal oppression at the very outset of *My Feudal Lord*:

“When I decided to write this book, I was more than aware of the many perils of exposing my private life to a male-dominated Muslim society with crushing conservative sensibilities” (unpaginated preface).

*My Feudal Lord* is an account of Durrani's emergence of the self. Here the primary focus is on the individual while the social contexts form secondary concerns. In her interview with Sadia Dehlvi, Durrani states that if 56 percent of the population is not allowed to raise its voice then we cannot have any democracy. This was one of the reasons why she wrote an unconventional and unconservative book despite being brought up in a conventional and conservative matter. Durrani was accused for exposing Pakistan's dirty laundry in public. Her writings exposed Pakistan's great political and religious leaders. In “Violation against women in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*”, Vijay Mehta and Sajad Ahmad Khan cites the definition of violence against women by United Nation general assembly: “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to a woman, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or in private life” (127). In *Blasphemy*, Durrani writes, “There is a disorder, because we are so silent ... We do not want to become inconvenient by putting ourselves in roles which will not be immediately accepted. That silence of ours is a very major reason for social and political malaise. I see lethargy everywhere, in everybody ...” (1). She states, “One of the things that I became one hundred percent sure was that one must not be afraid to raise one's voice against what one feels is wrong and finds painful. If one does not break the silence one can't correct disorder” (2).

In *My Feudal Lord*, Durrani identifies several factors that prevent the self realization of women. She finds veil as one such obstacle. In *My Feudal Lord*, she states that the Hayat family

to which her mother belonged was renowned for the good looks which were the result of intermarriages with Spanish women. “The beautiful women of the family, who wore exotic Eastern dress, nevertheless spoke and behaved in an Anglicized way and were thus considered by the ‘natives’ to be ‘advanced’ or ‘fast’. They had ‘come out of the veil’” (22). In the article, “A woman’s story that shook Pakistan”, G.D. Govender states that Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* sparked off a “fire debate on the widely prevalent male notion, that women should be in purdah, to the more extreme view that they are “male chattel” with no legal rights and totally at the mercy of men. The latter view has been carried to murderous extremes in Afghanistan, where women have been killed simply for asserting the right to an education”.

Durrani highlights the plight of veiled women in Khar’s native place, Kot Addu by taking the case of Mustafa Khar’s third wife, Safia. Before her marriage to Khar, Safia was a ‘liberated’ woman who exuded an aura of adventure. She was from a lower middle-class background who worked as a flight attendant. Khar

Plucked Safia from the sky and locked her in a cage. His formerly modern bride went behind the veil, banished to the oblivion of his home village of KotAddu, where her mission was to live in anticipation of his infrequent visits. At the time, there was no electricity or plumbing in KotAddu. The women of the family were completely isolated from the outside world – the only sky Safia saw here was the patch above her new home. The walls were built high and no males other than her father-in-law and brothers-in-law could enter. She grew reconciled to a desert life the area being renowned for its barrenness and dry heat and became part of *zannana*(women’s chambers) where in every sense the male was king and the female slave. (45)

There Safia bore Mustafa a son, named Bilal, and a daughter who owing to a lack of medical facilities, died of diarrhoea. Tehmina Durrani states that in the interior regions of Sind, respectable women cover their faces with a *chader*, leaving only the eyes and brow visible (283). Tehmina is reminded of the necessity of modesty when she went to visit Mustafa without a *dupatta*(veil) in the prison. Khar reminded her, “You’ve forgotten a very basic thing. It represents your *sharam*(shame) and your *haya*(feminine modesty)” (301).

In “Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah”, Jasbir Jain comments,

The movement away from purdah is a movement towards self-identity and freedom which, though highly desirable and worthy aims in themselves, are equally traumatic in their effects on women. They may often isolate them, lead to social ostracisation, may expose them to extreme poverty or humiliation or necessitate extreme self-denial. Doing away with purdah calls for a total change in the ideas of socializing, in family relationships and in the manner in which women view themselves. These are required to enable the concepts of personhood and responsibility to grow, and for supportive systems to develop so that the joy of growing up female can be truly felt. (252)

Lila Abu-Lughod points out,

Sexuality is the most potent threat to the patrilineal, patricentered system and to the authority of those who uphold it [...] and women are those most closely identified with sexuality through their reproductive activities. Therefore, to show respect for that social order and the people who represent it women must deny their sexuality. (qtd. in Papanek, "Caging the Lion" 81)

The effect of marriage on the lives of women is another aspect discussed. A woman is brought up to believe that marriage is the ultimate goal of her life thus making it difficult to break away from an unhappy marriage. They are trained to be obedient, dutiful and self-effacing. Durrani's elder half-sister Rubina was placed in charge of the three younger girls as a training exercise in preparation for her own marriage and motherhood. Durrani says that in Pakistan the goal of a Pakistani woman was to marry. Girl children were trained to avoid men. The world of men was different from the world of women. Durrani says that her childhood was encumbered by a list of don'ts designed to maintain a distance with the masculine world. "Never wear make-up or nail polish. Do not look at boys. Avoid modern girlfriends and avoid any girl who has an older brother. Never visit a friend without special permission and without your nanny. Never pick up the telephone. Never go out alone with the driver. Never stand around in the kitchen with the male servants" (28).

Marriage was a sacred and irrevocable institution. "If a husband turned out to be a brute, it was the wife's duty to persevere until she changed his character. A broken marriage was a

reflection of a woman's failure" (29). Durrani in her desperate attempts to escape from her household chose marriage as a means of liberation because she realized that she was being "raised as a schizophrenic; an appearance of perfection was more important than genuine feelings. There was no question of discovering oneself. Identity and individuality were crushed. Personality failed to develop" (29-30). Durrani married Anees because her low self-esteem convinced her that no other man would find it possible to marry her. Even as Khar's wife her spirit was silenced. Soon after her marriage with Khar she realized that a woman's future does not lay in marriage. She recognized, "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). Unable to comprehend her real self she felt that she had become similar to Khar's former wife, Sherry. Whenever he found Durrani laughing or joking with her parents his mood darkened and soon he found a pretext for an argument. "I just tried my best not to provoke him. If I dared to object in some meager way, the beating was only worse. At last I understood Sherry's dilemma – by the minute I became like her" (106).

Durrani says that her marriage was sustained not by the relationship, "but by complicated external forces: my ego, fear of failure in the eyes of my family and society, fear of losing my children, fear of losing my status as a married woman" (168-169). But the most important factor was her unwillingness to be inferior to her sister, Adila. Durrani states that Khar's preference for Adila has reduced her to a worm, one that was slithering in the muck and filth of dishonor and degradation. But later when he pledged his undying love for her and compared her favorably to Adila, Durrani realizes, "Who is he to choose? Why have I given this man the privilege of choosing between me and my sister? Why are we queuing for him to make his decision?" (182). Durrani was eager to maintain the marriage intact. Her mother had warned her, "This is your second marriage and I don't want you, for any reason at all, to leave him. You can only leave his home in a coffin. This is the point on which I take you back into the family" (126). She says,

I knew that I could not leave him. I had entered into a controversial marriage, and I had to strive to keep it intact. I recognized that there was always an effort and a price to pay for success; I must not fail at any cost. A lasting and happy marriage was my only value. Under its respectable shroud, alongside my powerful husband, my mother would not be able to shun me, and the fear of that happening became equal to – or even greater than –

my fear of him. The two fears kept me shaken and traumatized. I did not have the confidence to walk away. I reasoned that Khar would hunt me down, and find me, no matter how far I ran. Then he would murder me. I was convinced of it. (108-109)

Durrani also analyses the problems involved in obtaining divorce. She was able to divorce Mustafa Khar because of his affair with her sister, Adila. Islam does not permit a man's marriage with two sisters. Muslim women had the right to seek divorce. She also had the right to remarry after divorce. Yet the practices in the society make Durrani proclaim: "A Pakistani woman will endure almost anything in order to hold a marriage together" (55). An ideal Muslim girl does not seek divorce. Regarding her situation after divorce, Tehmina says: "A divorcee in Pakistani society is always a prime target for malicious gossip. Wagging tongues and leering glances turned me into a recluse. I spent most of my time either at home or in the office" (85). "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" (77). The patriarchal feudal system does not provide the rights to women. When Mustafa refused to grant her a divorce, Durrani decided to apply for *Khula*. *Khula* literally meant to 'disown' or 'repudiate', says Durrani. In *My Feudal Lord*, Tehmina Durrani says, "*Khula* is a right of divorce granted to a woman by Islamic law as long as she agrees to rescind part or all of her property claims. Mustafa could not force me to continue the marriage, but he could leave me destitute" (283).

Tehmina was Mustafa Khar's sixth wife and he continued to marry even after divorcing her. Islam condemned all sexual relations outside marriage as *zina*. This prompted men to marry several women and to divorce them easily and replace them with others. Like Mustafa, Tehmina's father also is shown to have illicit relationship with a woman named Sabiha Hasan who has worked with him when he was the governor of the State Bank. Mother was worried and Tehmina felt that it was the ultimate loss of face for a woman who lived on appearances. Her father justified his act by pointing out that her mother had cramped his personality.

Women are not regarded as individuals with their own rights and values. They can be the objects of love only if they remain beautiful. Durrani was neglected by her parents as she was not as pretty as her sisters. This damage of her sense of self along with her yearning to be loved and accepted created much trouble in her later life. Durrani who was a dark child was a shock to her mother. She was isolated and condemned to neglect. Her mother never hugged or kissed her and

it was extremely painful for young Durrani when her mother felt embarrassed to present her to friends and relatives. Her mother preferred her son, Asim and her white-skinned daughters, Minoos and Adila. The darker daughters, Rubina, Zarmina and Tehmina could never please her. Her maternal grandmother, Shamshad who favoured Durrani's mother over her darker sister, Samar sought to 'get rid of the dark curse'. Her grandmother advised her that parents like pretty children. "Your mother will love you more if you are looking nice" (27). "Cucumber juice, lemons, fresh cream and a pungent-smelling bleaching agent called Amex were rubbed into our mud-coloured faces" (26). Though she gradually emerged as a 'socially acceptable butterfly' she says, "Poor grandmother never realized how deeply the complex of being ugly was setting in – how much it would affect my life" (27). Her father's family too was more averse to her colour than her mother's family. Although Durrani had 'lightened' she still was not the conventional beauty and her father's family feared that she would remain a spinster – the worst humiliation for a Pakistani woman.

One of Durrani's friends warned her regarding Khar: "He just loves you because you look good ... You dress well. You're good for his image. Once he sees you with curlers or with night creams slapped on your face he won't love you. He likes the package – not the reality" (80). But Durrani who was very much in need of love could not accept the real situation. Khar married beautiful women and made them his slaves. His fifth wife Shahrazad was extremely beautiful and westernized. He married her because "He was to accompany Bhutto to the US, and he was in a hurry to have a charming, well-bred and – best of all – a stunning woman on his arm as he walked into the White House" (52). When Khar realized that Durrani's sister, Adila was more beautiful than her he started an affair with her. To gain Khar's approval, "Adila changed her manner of dressing. Suddenly all the western outfits were discarded and replaced with traditional eastern clothes, borrowed from our mother's extensive wardrobe. She draped herself with a veil and even covered her head for effect" (135). After Adila lost her interest in Khar she reveals to Durrani:

I told him that Tehmina always maintains that you love her. He said that you're very foolish. "If I say she has beautiful eyes, she thinks I love her." He pleaded with me to see him. ... He just wanted a glimpse of me. He's obsessed with me. He kept telling me that he would die without me. (218-19)

Durrani awoke one morning with a compulsion to cut her hair which Khar much adored. She was firm even when her hairdresser pointed out that her incredibly long hair was the key to her beauty. She had not cut her hair since the age of fourteen and as the scissors snipped her hair away she felt that Khar's evil spirit was exorcised from her life. It was out of vengeance that she had decided to chop off her locks which she regarded as "the jewel of (her) crown". She wanted to put an end to her objectification by Khar. As Hafiza Nilofar Khan points out in "South Asian Fiction and Marital Agency of Muslim Wives", "The act of cutting her hair relieves her of a huge psychological and moral burden of giving into each of her husband's whims and desires" (179-180). But she was stirred by Khar's tears and pleadings. Later when she decided to return to him, she felt embarrassed to face Pakistani press as she had called him names like 'Rasputin' during the public custody battle.

Greer sees 'hair' as a symbol of sexuality. Though artificial hair and false eye lashes are popular, women "strip off every blade of hair in their armpits and on their arms and legs" (27). In "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power", Sandra Bartky states that "the art of make-up is the art of disguise" (228).

Simone de Beauvoir points out:

Thus the supreme necessity for women is to charm a masculine heart; intrepid and adventurous though they may be, it is the recompense to which all heroines aspire; and most often no quality is asked of them other than their beauty. It is understandable that the care of her physical appearance should become for the young girl a real obsession; be they princesses or shepherdesses, they must always be pretty in order to obtain love and happiness; homeliness is cruelly associated with wickedness, and one is in doubt, when misfortunes shower on the ugly, whether their crimes or their ill-favoured looks are being punished. (30)

In *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf refers to beauty myth as a form of control against women. "The beauty myth tells a story. The quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it [...] it is the last best belief system that keeps

male dominance intact” (12). Women are “required to look expensive, fashionable, and well-groomed and not to be seen in the same dress twice” (*Female Eunuch*49).

Durrani also refers to her inner confusion and split self. Pointing to her inner confusion she states, “... being yourself earned only condemnation. I was acceptable only when I was unlike myself – whoever that was – because I wore a mask of submission. I developed a personality that was against my true nature, but compatible with mothers. Inwardly I became confused and sometimes ashamed that what I must really be was incorrect and unacceptable” (25). Earlier in her childhood her grandmother tried to ‘transform’ her by suppressing her dark appearance.

Her split self is reflected in her thoughts and actions which are sometimes contradictory. She attempts to stay with Khar and at the same time wants to divorce him. At times she believed like Khar’s former wife Sherry that she had to protect her children from Khar. But she also forgets Khar’s hideous crimes and presents him as a symbol of purity and goodness to her children. Durrani says, “I could see the distinction between a common criminal and a political prisoner, and tried to paint a word picture of their father as pure goodness combating evil darkness” (304).

Durrani also points out that gender inequality is perpetuated by institutionalizing motherhood. While being pregnant with her third baby she felt that nothing could be worse than life and swallowed a bottle full of capsules to put an end to her useless existence. Although she was saved she still wanted to die. She states in *My Feudal Lord*,

Mustafa was desperate to seal our new bond by producing another child, but I was convinced that my pregnancies were cursed... Was it mere coincidence that my pregnancies coincided with the worst times of our marriage? Or did God visit me with the most severe trials whenever the seed nestled in my womb? ...Where could I go with a child in my womb and three in my arms? He had me where he wanted me – at his mercy once again. Western women refer to this state of dependency as ‘barefoot and pregnant’.  
(225)

Durrani was denied the right to be with her children. She states that “there was no other equivalent pain” (121). Khar derived sadistic pleasure by kidnapping his children, Naseeba,

Nisha and Ali and by separating Durrani from her first daughter, Tanya. Thus she was denied motherhood— one of the most significant aspects of womanhood. “Everytime I saw an infant on the street or in a pram in the park, my maternal ache was stirred, as though they might replace it, but I sensed that Mustafa viewed this as weakness” (122). The American writer, Ellen Kay, in *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, suggests that in women, the maternal instinct is apparent from early childhood to death, and mothers love is the finest and purest emotion in the world (qtd. in Banner 90).

Adrienne Rich finds that motherhood is just another means by which woman’s body is brought under control. She states, “The woman’s body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected” (55). “Certainly the mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions” (Rich 45).

Durrani highlights the ‘narcissistic masochism in conjugal relations’. Durrani narrates Khar’s attempt to break her both physically and psychologically and to cripple the feeling of self-esteem in his own life partner. It was a shattering experience for her to be battered by the man she had loved and trusted most. His torture ranges from slaps to murder attempt. She presents scenes of violence – hits her face cutting her lips, thrown to the floor, kicking as she fell and crashed her forehead against the corner of the bedside. She screamed in horror as blood gushed into her eyes. In another episode of violence she is stripped bare and naked by Khar. Durrani had very graphically depicted the beating episodes in her book.

Durrani highlights the need for women to form a supportive network to counsel, protect and assist each other. It was through her intimate bond with Sherry that Durrani came to know more about Khar. Sherry opened up to her in the absence of Khar. “Sherry opened up to me, more than before, and began to tell me stories that featured Khar as a grotesque sadist who derived pleasure from humiliating the ones he professed to love” (94). She heard stories about Naubahar’s divorce and the dreadful way he treated Safia. Khar knew that Durrani could be victimized only if she is isolated from her family and society.

Durrani realized that her personality had to change. She was weak and submissive like Khar’s previous wives. She recognized her fault and tried to deal with him on a different level. In

one of their quarrels when Khar threatened “‘I’ll break every bone in your body” she gathered the courage to declare war. She grabbed the hot pot from the stove and threw it at him. He screamed in pain and for a moment he was paralyzed. But when he tried to beat her, she pushed him in the chest and yelled: “The next time you raise your hand to me I will pick up a knife and kill you!” (188). Khar backed off when he realized the power and conviction in her voice. The symptoms of her weak personality vanished. She demanded no apology, refused to cry and tortured him with indifference. He was confused and frightened by her resistance. He felt the threat to his masculinity. She says, “In the past, my tears, my arguments, my pleadings had been like applause to his great acts of misplaced masculinity. Now my composure upset him; my silence weakened him” (190). She found the way to get out of his trap, the path to her self-realization. It was clear to her that nobody would fight for her unless she did it herself. One day she felt the irrelevance of all; nothing mattered and found the inner strength to fight for herself. Hafiza Nilofar Khan points out in “South Asian Fiction and Marital Agency of Muslim Wives”,

Indifference works as an agential trope because it reflects mature behavior, and is a better choice than throwing tantrums or sulking; both of which expose a childish mentality and give a husband the opportunity to show off his authority by having the last word in an argument, physically abusing his wife, or even by pardoning her so-called mistakes. Durrani learns fast enough in life that real agency lies in showing a cold shoulder to a husband who prefers attention. Her immunity, apathy and alienation alarm her husband more than her open revolts since he cannot fathom what is going on in her mind, and fears her transformation into an enigmatic, mysterious woman he is not used to dealing with ... The immediate change of mood and attention that Durrani receives from her husband the moment she decides to use the tactics of indifference and dispassion further points at the efficiency of these methods as agential tools of subversion. (191)

Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* is a fierce attack on patriarchy. As she points out in *My Feudal Lord* it was her reply to Khar who once said, “Tehmina, you are nothing anymore. 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” (373-74). She replied to it by the international success of *My Feudal Lord*: “Well, Mustafa, now the world will soon know you only as Tehmina Durrani’s ex-husband” (382). Durrani has succeeded in changing her position

from being a victim to someone who is in control of her destiny. Her experiences are of paramount importance, as they eventually paved the way for her liberation enabling her to become a political, social and feminist activist.

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