

## From Silence to Defiance: Violence and Resistance in Tehmina

### Durrani's Autobiography *My Feudal Lord*

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#### Abstract

Women all over the world have been exploited, subjugated and dominated by men in all societies. They are treated as 'extras' and 'surplus' in their respective societies. They are ill-treated and not given their due place in society. Growing up in such a society that is full of exploitation and subjugation is a challenge for women in their survival. Not only do illiterate women become the victims of male dominance, but the condition of the educated women is also worsened. Various female writers have given voice to millions of suppressed women through their writings. Tehmina Durrani, a well-educated, established woman, was extremely exploited and subjugated by her husband, Mustafa Khar. She has very bravely exposed the hypocrisy of patriarchal society in her autobiography *My Feudal Lord*. Her autobiography deals with various themes like lust, rape, extramarital relations, domestic violence and betrayal. This paper analyses Tehmina Durrani's struggle against violence and resistance for identity in a male-dominated society. She becomes a political, social and feminist activist and takes control of her life and destiny. She puts an example of women's courage and resistance in her autobiography for all the suppressed women in all societies.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Feudal, Exploitation, Subjugation, Resistance, Identity.

## Introduction

This paper examines violence against women through the lived experiences of Tehmina Durrani, focusing on the physical, emotional, and psychological torment she endured in her marriage to Mustafa Khar, and highlighting her courageous resistance against patriarchal oppression. Women are always treated as inferior to men because the male-dominated society doesn't accept women as equals. In almost all societies, women are controlled by their male counterparts. Violence is the main problem in tribal-cum feudal society. In such feudal societies, women are just considered property and an object of enjoyment. In this context, Sanchita Bhattacharya, in her paper titled Status of Women in Pakistan has remarked: "Apart from family, the feudal system in the society has also caused severe antipathy towards women. The famous proverb of such a system, "*Zan, Zar, Zameen*" (women, money and land) as the source of all evil, does reflect utter disregard for women and also her commoditisation." (Bhattacharya, 187)

It is believed that women are merely made for men. Regarding this Mariam's husband, Rasheed, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, remarks: "A woman's face, he'd said, is her husband's business only." (Hosseini, 82) In a feudal society, men want to keep women under their thumbs like slaves. Violence has many layers, like physical assault, rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence, verbal, emotional and psychological abuse, and wife beatings. Women are economically handicapped and are completely dependent upon men, and are critically ill-treated by them all the time. Gender based violence and domestic violence against women are due to devaluing their work.

In the beginning of her autobiography Tehmina Durrani has described the feudal system that was prevalent during British rule. These feudal lords helped the British to control the masses. Later, they became corrupted, and these lords did not relinquish their control over the masses and land. Gradually, they became rich and had full control over the masses in

Pakistan. The feudal system had collapsed in other countries, but it is still prevalent in Pakistan. Regarding this, Sanchita Bhattacharya, in her paper titled Status of Women in Pakistan has remarked: “On papers, the Constitution of Pakistan places no restrictions on women’s participation in politics; nevertheless, their presence in the political parties as well as in the political structure at local level, provincial and national level remains insignificant, due to cultural and structural barriers.”(Bhattacharya, 193) Feudalism in Pakistan is still surviving in the name of religion: “Feudalism was a license to plunder, rape and even murder.”(Durrani, 40)

### ***My Feudal Lord (1994)***

*My Feudal Lord* was written by Tehmina Durrani in 1994. The book is divided into three parts. The first part is titled Lion of Punjab. The second chapter is titled ‘Law of the Jungle,’ and the third is ‘Lioness’. In this book, Durrani has exposed the various layers of violence. She has also described her childhood experiences, the brutal treatment of her mother. Tehmina states:

My childhood was encumbered by a lengthy list of don’ts, all designed to maintain an inviolate distance between myself and 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 a 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. (Durrani , 28)

### **Theoretical Framework:**

This study is examined through the theoretical perspectives of patriarchy and feminism as proposed by Sylvia Walby, Virginia Woolf, Kate Millett, and Simone de Beauvoir. The primary objective of the concept of patriarchy is to analyse the position and status of women within a male-dominated society, whereas feminist theory seeks to explore,

question, and challenge this unequal structure. In a patriarchal system, men exercise authority and control, often resulting in the domination, oppression, and exploitation of women. Viana Muller defines patriarchy as a social structure in which women's identities and roles are determined largely in relation to men, such as fathers, husbands, and brothers, thereby placing them in a subordinate position. Women are thus governed and controlled by male authority figures. In contrast, feminism is a socio-political movement that strives to secure equality, rights, and recognition for women in society. Kate Millett, in her influential work *Sexual Politics*, argues that the roots of women's oppression lie deeply embedded within the gendered structure of patriarchy. She asserts that women can achieve empowerment and liberation only when gender discrimination is completely eradicated, as it is perpetuated and reinforced by patriarchal systems.

### **Research Methodology**

This study is based on both primary and secondary sources:

1. **Primary Source:** My Feudal Lord (1994), Tehmina Durrani.
2. **Secondary Sources:** Various academic articles, books, critical essays on patriarchy and gender discrimination, web resources, and studies related to feminism.

### **Patriarchy: An age-old Social System designed to control Women**

The term patriarchy refers to a system in which men hold power and authority over women in both family and societal matters. Sylvia Walby, in *Theorising Patriarchy*, defines it as a system of social structures and practices through which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. She further identifies six key structures of patriarchy: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions. Walby also distinguishes between private patriarchy and public patriarchy. Private patriarchy operates within the household, where women are directly controlled by individual men, whereas public patriarchy functions through broader social institutions such

as the state, workplace, and cultural systems. Feminist theorists argue that women, like men, deserve equal freedom, identity, and dignity. They emphasise that women are independent individuals with their own agency and should not be confined to traditional domestic roles. However, patriarchal societies often portray women as physically weaker and restrict them to the private sphere of the home.

Within such a framework, women are denied the right to make independent decisions and are expected to submit to male authority. Even young girls depend on their parents for decisions regarding their education and future. Society imposes the belief that a woman's primary duty is to manage the household, care for children, and ensure the well-being of her family. Such norms reinforce gender inequality and sustain the dominance of patriarchal structures.

### **Discussion:**

*My Feudal Lord* is a saga of extreme exploitation and subjugation of Tehmina Durrani, as well as other women. In her ordeal, Tehmina Durrani has described her torments and resistance against her feudal husband, Khar. Durrani faced very meekly and silently the torments of her husband for fourteen years. Regarding the pitiable plight of the women, Bushra Habib, Sofia Dildar and Abdul Baseer in their paper titled Women in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord: A Feminist Study* have remarked:

Though Durrani's work was marked as blasphemous on certain grounds, the fact remained firm at its place that her work represents and shows the real picture of the subjugation of women in third-world countries on one hand. On the other hand, it brings to the scene the unjust ruling of patriarchy, which is directly responsible for the present discriminatory status of women. The book also offers many strategies to build resistance and create awareness regarding women's plight. (Habib, Dildar Baseer, 97)

In almost all societies, males have the right to decide females' future. In her own house, a woman was not treated well by her mother. She didn't have the right to ask questions regarding her marriage. She was asked not to refuse to marry a man chosen for her by her family:

. . . Mother had us convinced that she would not oppose anyone whom we wished to marry -- as long as we informed her immediately of our intention. Despite the fact that our mother had divorced her first husband, we were taught that 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. (Durrani, 28-29) This clearly shows how the females are ill-treated in a feudalistic society. Tehmina wants to escape from such a smothering environment, but she finds it impossible.

Marriage is often regarded as a safe haven for women. Tehmina thought that marriage was the only escape from the suffocating environment of the house: “. . . there was no other goal in life but marriage.”(Durrani, 30) Tehmina was married to Anees, and they had a daughter named Tanya. Tehmina and Mustafa Khar met in a public gathering, and they were attracted to each other. They met secretly and madly fell in love. Tehmina's husband knew about their secret meetings. Mustafa made her divorce her husband, Anees. She divorced him and married Mustafa Khar and became his sixth wife. Mustafa Khar was not a good human being. He had spoiled the lives of many women with his potential and extraordinary rights. Women entered his life in no time: “Women entered Mustafa's life speedily and left just as quickly.”(Durrani , 44)

There are many examples of Mustafa Khar's subhuman treatment of his wives. There is a fine example of his brutal treatment of his wife, Safia. Tehmina remarks:

Mustafa immediately reverted to the dictates of his feudal heritage. He 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 Kot Addu, where his mission was to live in anticipation of his infrequent visits. At the time, there was no electricity or plumbing in Kot Addu. The women of the family were completely isolated from the outside world—the only sky Safia saw here was the patch above the compound of her new home. The walls were built high and no males other than her father-in-law and brother-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 the *zannana* (women's chambers) where in every sense the male was the king and the female slave. (Durrani, 45)

Not only did Mustafa ruin Safia's life, but Naubahar also became a victim of his brutal treatment. He ruined her life completely. He visited Safia rarely during their "seven-year marriage." (Durrani, 51) In feudal times, men had certain powers. They were allowed to betray their wives, but the females were not allowed to be unfaithful to their husbands. Tehmina Durrani remarks: "It did not matter that Mustafa had ruined Safia's life, that he had also married Naubahar and ruined her life, that he had visited Safia for mere hours in the course of her seven-year marriage, that he did not love her. Feudal law allows a man to act in such a manner, but for a wife to betray a husband is the supreme sin." (Durrani, 51)

There is another example of a feudalistic society. If a woman betrayed her husband's trust, Islamic law allowed him to kill her, but a man could develop a relationship with any woman. Tehmina says: "In his feudal moral scheme, Islamic law allows a man to kill his unfaithful wife in a fit of passion, but doesn't allow for premeditated vengeance. So he simply divorced Safia and banished his offending younger brother to Britain." (Durrani, 51-52)

Tehmina has also exposed Mustafa's brutal treatment of his wife, Sherry. He ill-treated Sherry and "abused her with filthy language. . ." (Durrani, 95) One day, Mustafa asked Sherry for his multivitamin bottle. The bottle was half-empty. He asked about the rest and became very angry. Sherry said that she had taken it as she needed it due to her pregnancy. Listening to this, he became a ferocious animal and kicked Sherry: "Mustafa kicked her in the buttocks. He pulled off his thick rubber-soled shoes and struck her with them. Then he roughly pushed her out of the room." (Durrani, 95) This clearly shows the devilish nature of Mustafa Khar toward his wives.

After divorcing Anees, Tehmina Durrani married Mustafa Khar. After marrying him, her life became hell. In a patriarchal society, a woman was believed to be a faithful wife and lived according to her husband's wishes and desires. In this context, Ujwala Gosavi, in her paper titled "A New Identity of Women in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*", has observed: "Tehmina's conventional upbringing conditioned by her patriarchal environment, in which she lived, made her accept her husband Mustafa's physical assaults and sexual brutality, enduring these attacks as a part of her destiny." (Gosavi, 120)

He stooped so low that he broke all the human boundaries. He subjected her to extreme cruelty. She told him about her first wedding night and he interrogated her about her first meeting with her ex-husband, Anees. When Tehmina didn't reply to his questions, he became furious and started beating her. Tehmina observes: "He grabbed my right wrist and twisted, forcing me to my knees. Even as a shriek escaped from my lips, I told myself to be quiet, lest the servants, or his mother, hear." (Durrani, 102) After some time, he released his grip and rubbed her sore arm. He ordered me to sit down again on the bed, and the interrogation continued. He asked: "When you had sex with Anees, did you respond?"

I whimpered, 'I was only eighteen. I wasn't interested.' Liar! he raged. I could feel his body tighten. I could hear his breathing grow heavier. In the dark, I could sense that his eyes

were bulging out of their sockets. I knew that his fists were clenched. With deliberate malice, he asked, 'If you did not want sex with Anees, how did Tanya come to be born?'

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Suddenly, he threw me down onto the bed and jumped on me. Sitting astride my belly, he slapped me in the face repeatedly with his open palm, forehand and backhand . . . 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 onto the floor. I felt a wetness run down my legs, but had no time to realize that my bladder lacked the strength to face this kind of fear. He threw me against a wall, picked me up and threw me against another one - again and again, and again. (Durrani, 102-103)

Tehmina Durrani was not allowed to read the newspaper. It is believed in feudalistic society that a ". . . woman was an instrument of a man's carnal pleasure. If the woman ever indicated that she felt pleasure, she was a potential adulteress, not to be trusted.

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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. . . 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. I interpreted the Koran differently. To me, land had to be tended and cultivated; only then could it produce in abundance. (Durrani, 106-107)

Tehmina didn't have the right to think independently. He asked her to think what he wanted her to think: "You daren't think of anything that I have forbidden you to think about."(Durrani, 108)

Tehmina said that Mustafa beat her mercilessly and ordered her to bear all the beatings. When she opposed his violence and torments, she was silenced in the name of

religion and honour. Both Mustafa and her mother imposed barriers of religion, marriage and honour upon her. Mustafa remarks: “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.”(Durrani, 104)

Tehmina was given lectures about certain moral rules. She should be a perfect daughter, an obedient mother and a faithful wife. She didn’t have her own individual identity or individuality. She remarks: “. . . we were being raised to be 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. 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.”(Durrani, 29-30)

For fourteen years, Tehmina faced the ill-treatment and cruelties of her husband, Khar. She was not allowed to raise her voice against his violence. If she dared to oppose his violence, she got a more severe beating until she became unconscious. Mustafa Khar justified his beatings by twisting the interpretation of the Koran. Tehmina was severely beaten by Khar because she had turned adulterous by divorcing Anees. He punished her mercilessly and then justified that he loved her deeply: “He continued to use my first marriage as a stick to beat me with; my divorce, and remarriage had proved to him that I was capable of adultery.”(Durrani, 106) In a male-dominated society, a woman was not allowed to have extramarital relations. Adultery was strictly prohibited. A woman’s adultery was not tolerated at any cost in a feudal society. Safia was brutally punished by Mustafa when he discovered her adultery: “When he had discovered Safia’s infidelity, he had, apparently, beaten her without mercy and broken several of her ribs. But, even worse, he had ordered one of the

maids to insert red chilli powder into the vagina of poor Dai Ayesha, the nanny, for not informing him of the affair.”(Durrani, 94)

There is another example of Mustafa’s cruel treatment of Durrani. When Tehmina interrogated Khar about his relationship with her younger sister, Adila. Although she was afraid to ask such a question of Mustafa, at the same time, she was very eager to know about their relationship. When she questioned him about his relationship with Adila, he became angry. He began beating Tehmina with a gun that was on the wall of his house:

Mustafa’s eye fell on his double-barrelled shotgun, which stood against the wall next to the T.V set. In one swift movement, he reached out with his right hand, grabbed the barrel and swung it at me. The wooden butt of the gun slammed into my side. I feel, but instinctively scrambled to my feet. I screamed, ‘You have destroyed my life. He silenced me with another blow. I crumbled to the floor and drew my feet against my belly for protection. He struck me repeatedly with a heavy gun stock, aiming for my back, my side, my legs, but he was in sufficient control to attempt to avoid striking me on the head. His face was a blur, an object that I must fear and obey without question. I tried to stifle my screams, lest Dai Ayesha and the children hear, but I could not. I knew that, by now they must be huddled nearby, frightened to death. I began shouting for Bilal’s help. Mustafa only stopped when he was in evidence of obvious damage. Some of his blows were errant. My mouth showed blood.”(Durrani , 163-64)

Tehmina often contemplated fleeing from her husband’s clutches. She was like a bird in a cage, eager to escape confinement. She wanted to break that prison of serfdom, but all in vain. When she filed for divorce against him, her husband, Khar, abducted his own children and pressured Tehmina to come back to him. She went back for the sake of her children. He also promised that he wouldn’t harm her any more. But he was a hypocrite. He was a real chameleon. He called himself a Shikari. In this context, Soumita Adhikary, in her paper

titled *Autobiography as Testimony: Truth and Fiction in Tehmina Durrani's Writings*, has opined: “. . . she calls him a *shikari*. She directly called him a *shikari* and indirectly herself a *shikar*, the hunted; but was it not she, first curious to enquire about Khar and was fascinated by him. The qualities with which she claims Mustafa made hunt were the very ones she was attracted to. Didn't she realise Sherry's cautious warnings about Mustafa? Though she veils it under the impression of her being trapped, it hints somewhat towards her incapability to hold herself.”(Adhikary, 381)

When Tehmina came back to him, he started torturing her again, as usual as before. Tehmina decided to fight back for the sake of her existence and identity. She resolved to take action and make decisions against Mustafa's torments and violence. She mustered the courage to raise her voice against his brutalities. She tried hard to overcome all her weaknesses. The reality of her younger sister Adila's relationship with Mustafa Khar instilled in her the power of decision-making. She made a strong decision to leave Mustafa forever. She decided to divorce him. Mustafa wanted to teach her a lesson. He abducted his own children. This was an act of revenge by Mustafa. Tehmina was lonely and desolate during this period without her children. But during this period of solitude, she developed an integral strength to fight against the cruel Mustafa. She became so strong that she no longer wanted to be tortured and punished by Mustafa Khar. She remarks:

I wanted Mustafa to know that he was no longer dealing with the old, passive Tehmina. He was locking horns with someone who had served a long apprenticeship under a masterful manipulator. I said to Jatoi: “He has blackmailed me in the most cruel manner. Tell him that as he was a student of Mr Bhutto, I was a student of Bhutto's vile product. He is Mr Mustafa Khar, but I am Mrs Mustafa Khar. I shall fight in his own spirit by his own standards.”(Durrani, 242)

After the divorce, Tehmina became a bold and free woman. Writing about her violence and torments raised her voice against violence, cruelties and injustice. She gathered the courage to write and publish a book about her feudal and hypocritical husband. When Mustafa read about it in the newspaper, he found it ridiculous. But Tehmina was never shaken at that time. By publishing her autobiography, she had her own identity as a strong and bold 'TEHMINA DURRANI'. In this context, Maria Noor and Munnzza Riaz, in their paper titled "Gender Hegemony in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*", have remarked: "Boldly exposing the ruthlessness she had to face, Durrani made us realise the gender politics of feudal classes. For Durrani, a feudal is only being with the education of a Feudal lord, which makes him hard-hearted. Feudal law teaches them gender differences and gives them the degree of power of hegemony. Men in feudal society tend to remain Men, even if it is a matter of their mothers."(Noor and Riaz, 222)

### **Conclusion**

The narrative of *My Feudal Lord* ends with a strong and confident statement by Tehmina Durrani, showing that she has finally gained her own identity and independence after years of suffering. This moment reflects her courage and self-respect, as she no longer sees herself as someone defined by her husband but as an individual with her own voice and recognition. By sharing her painful experiences of torture and exploitation, she not only tells her own story but also represents many women who go through similar struggles. Durrani makes it clear that the poor condition of women is not caused by religion, but by the patriarchal system and feudal culture that keep women oppressed. Through her life story, she encourages women to understand their inner strength and stand up for themselves instead of silently accepting injustice.

She also highlights how silence supports oppression and allows powerful men to continue their dominance. According to her, when women remain quiet, injustice grows

stronger. Therefore, she urges women to speak out against unfair treatment and fight for their rights. In this way, her autobiography is not just a personal story but a strong message of awareness, resistance, and empowerment for all women living under oppression.

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