

**The Menace of Culture: A Reading of the Lives of
the Pakistani Women in Tehmina Durrani's
*My Feudal Lord***

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Feminist studies is a major force to reckon with in the postcolonial discourse as "both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate" (Ashcroft 101). Hence the experience of women in a patriarchal society can easily be correlated to those of the colonized subjects. The feminist and the postcolonial politics strive to oppose the domineering forces that want to perpetuate the subjugation.

Though feminist studies has given a great impetus to the feminist movements which seek to lift up the sagging status of the underprivileged women, still a large section of the women of the third world countries struggle to sustain their identity which is constantly under the threat of being effaced. In Pakistan, a major political force of the South Asian region, the condition of women is appalling and needs more empathetic attention. Studies confirm that Pakistan is in the top list of nations where life is difficult for women.

Though a peripheral perusal of the problem of the women of this region may point at religious beliefs and practices as the offending agents, a closer study will reveal the stark reality that it is the prevailing culture that subverts religion and politics to hold on to its patriarchal stature. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan wanted a Muslim homeland but a secular state. He felt that there is no Koranic injunction for women to be confined. Jan

view of the lives of the difficult daughters of their nation for international onlookers. For Tehmina Durrani it was a bold step forward to articulate to the world her traumatic experiences of her second marriage to a feudal chief and a political stalwart, Mustataf All Kaur. She had no inkling of the dire consequences of being drawn to Mustataf "like a moth to a flame" (21) in a high profile party in Lahore. She was just twenty one and married to Anees and Mustataf to Sherry.

Though born in a rich sophisticated family Tehmina had a troubled childhood. Her fashionable mother preferred her fairer children than the dark skinned daughter. The young girls like her are trained to keep away from men and get little chance to know the psychology of their male counterparts before marrying one. Tehmina writes,

Apart from my father, brother and a close relative, men were alien creatures, and from my earliest moments I was trained to avoid them. 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. (28)

But the irony is "... a man was the only future available to a Pakistani girl" (28). Westernised education and an Anglicized lifestyle of the family did not modernize the outlook of the parents regarding their daughters. The writer says, "our husbands were to be the only males to whom we would ever be exposed" (28).

Tehmina's mother's first marriage was with the Nawab of Tank's heir. Tank is situated in a remote tribal belt and the "... women were kept in strict purdah" (29). The wife hardly saw her husband. He came indoors at night. The men were educated abroad and lead a sophisticated life. But they practiced infanticide if a female child is born and the Nawab had no female offspring. Fear of losing the child made her divorce her husband well-knowing the risk of being branded a divorcee.

... "It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up in the four walls of their homes like prisoners" (55). But under dictatorship of Zia their condition "dramatically eroded". The tradition began with the introduction of laws, executed in the name of Allah, that were unfavourable to women. Every aspect of women's lives was targeted.

The Feudal System, a practice of the medieval period, perpetuated by the British colonizers for their economic gain, continues its grip on the political functioning in general and the rights of the women folks in particular. The feudal lords are power mongers and as the land they own, their women are also an expression of their power. And the choice of their women's future is at the mercy of these patriarchs. The author comments,

The feudal system is a carry-over from the time when the British ruled the whole of south central Asia. By bestowing land and absolute power upon certain "loyal" individuals the "white masters" were able to control the country's multitude with relatively little effort. With the passage of time, the privileged few multiplied their wealth by exploiting their feudal practices of tenant farming and arbitrary taxation. Feudalism was a licence to plunder, rape and even murder. (40)

Durrani adds that "some feudal families utilized Islam as a weapon of control" (40). Hence, Ayesha Siddiqi, in her online article expresses her apprehension saying, "I also wonder if religion is a tool in the hands of the feudal to ensure laws that would stop the melting of their empire."

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Godwin quotes him saying, "" We are victims of evil customs," he said. " It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of their homes like prisoners""(55). But under the dictatorship of Zia their condition "dramatically eroded". The degradation began with the introduction of laws, executed in the name of Allah, that were unfavourable to women. Every aspect of the women's lives was targeted.

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Tehmina is just one among many women who were the "obvious victims" of Mustafa Khar(95). He belonged to the Kharral tribe which a scholar describes as "thievish and with little taste for agriculture"(39). When they fell into a dispute with the crown they slaughtered their women and children "so as not to impede their journey" and moved to Punjab.

Mustafa married his illiterate cousin, much older than him, at the behest of his father when he was just seventeen. He ran away from her to Lahore, where he was attracted by the fashionable women. He discovered that he was comfortable with professional sex. Wasir suffered in silence when her marriage to Mustafa was dissolved and she was given as wife to a much younger brother-in-law. But she was spared the indignity of a divorcee. Then he married Firdaus, the jilted sweetheart of his friend. But he divorced her when she was still in the hospital after giving birth to his son. And when he returned to his village he was easily forgiven by his elders. Meanwhile, realizing that only politics could "bring legitimacy, power and protection"(42), he stood for a seat in the National Assembly and won it at twenty four. And soon he became a close associate of Bhutto.

Women entered Mustafa's life "speedily and left just as quickly"(44). As he lacked the self-confidence to court women of society he picked-up Safia, a flight attendant of lower middle-class background. When he married her "he reverted to his feudal heritage"(45) and his "formerly modern bride went behind the veil, banished to the oblivion of his home village of Kot Addu"(45). She got reconciled to this desert life "where in every sense the male was the king and the female slave"(45).

In 1967 Mustafa became one of the founding members of Bhutto's Pakistan's People's Party and rose to prominence. He met Safia and installed her as his mistress in Lahore. Later the secret marriage came

to limelight when he was appointed as the Governor of Panjab. So he divorced Naubahar and reinstalled Safia as his respectable wife. But he was shattered when he came to know that Safia had an illicit affair with his brother. Feudal law allowed a man to be disloyal "but for the wife to betray the husband is the supreme sin"(51). He restrained himself though "Islamic law allows a man to kill his unfaithful wife in a fit of passion"(51). He divorced Safia and opted for a more fashionable, anglicized Shahrazad as the ideal hostess of the Governor's household.

Tehmina grew more and more interested in Mustafa after their first meeting. Soon they began to meet secretly. When Sherry came to know of it she pleaded Tehmina to leave. Because in Pakistan society "Marriage may be purgatory, but divorce is hell"(77). Anees soon divorced Tehmina and she as a divorcee, became the prime target for malicious gossip. To restore her "mauled reputation" she married Mustafa in 1976 secretly and later came to live with Sherry who gave her a clinical analysis of her new husband. She said

... that he suffered from inferiority complex. He resented women from our social background and made it his mission to subjugate them. He disguised his class envy by assuming a feudal air.... He wanted to demolish the structure that ridiculed his origins and laughed at his lack of breeding and style. Women were his obvious victims and he was out to destroy them. (94-95)

When Tehmina witnessed the merciless beating of Sherry by Mustafa "she froze in shock". After the divorce of Sherry, Tehmina was left to bear his ruthless anger towards women. She soon understood that she had fallen into the "classic trap of the Pakistani Women" and she had "no power, no rights, no will" of her own(100). She was psychologically affected and "shuddered in fright" whenever he came home.

The next fourteen years of her traumatic marriage was a nightmare to Tehmina. She wanted to come out of it. But Mustafa would not let her go. He even had an incestuous affair with her younger sister Adila. But he refused to give her a divorce. She continued her fight against all odds. She says, "I had stressed out but could not afford to rest yet"(369). When Tehmina ultimately managed to get the divorce he only said, "You have no identity of your own"(374).

Tehmina's ultimate act of defiance was her decision to break her silence. She observes, "Our closed society considered it obscene for a woman to reveal her intimate secrets, but would not silence be a greater crime? Silence condones injustice, breeds subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy"(375). To cast a "stone at hypocrisy" she broke the "traditional silence"(375).

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A flawed sociopolitical system that is largely controlled by the tribal and feudal patriarchy is in opposition to the empowerment of women which they see as a threat to their monopoly. Quoting social activist Gulam Mustafa Baloch, the magazine *Dawn* reports,

He said girls and women were being kept from proper education because feudal lords, landlords and chieftains thought it was education which could transform the entire system of the land and harm their interests. He said those narrow-minded people were afraid of women's education as women empowerment posed a threat to their monopoly. He said those people ruined primary and middle education for women.

It is doubtless that it was Tehmina Durrani's education, understanding of the world and the ability to transfer her thoughts coherently which enabled her to break her silence in an audible voice. While a patriarchal discourse tries to subvert her existence and erase her identity, she emerges as a phoenix escaping the menacing tentacles of the feudal tenets, religious edicts, power politics and the social ethics of marital life. She wants herself to be heard by the less privileged sisters and gain momentum to break the stereotypical metaphors of imperialism and gender colonialism and reconstruct the biased social structure.

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