

Appraisal of Muslim Women's Status in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*

Rashami Thapa Adhikari

Asst. Professor of English

Patan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University

Email: rashmiadh@yahoo.com

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Abstract

*This paper scrutinizes the impact of Islamic laws and the broader process of Islamization on women's lives as represented in Tehmina Durrani's memoir *My Feudal Lord*. The female characters are so dominated in socio-cultural contexts of Pakistan that primarily practices Islam as the main guiding principle to affect the social practices and behaviors. Because of the rules led predominantly by patriarchy, women often suffer marginalization and oppression in both personal and public lives as portrayed in the novel. The objective of the paper is to critical analyze the impact of Islam on socio-cultural lives of women in Pakistan as fictionalized by Tehmina—a feminist writer and an advocate of human rights—who observes women rights as human rights in a broader context. By reading the literary text closely, it is analyzed from the feminist perspective. The combination of historical and legal context, the impact of Islam is explored. The researcher argues that Durrani's narrative not only exposes personal abuse within a feudal marriage but also illuminates how legal frameworks and socio-religious norms—especially those reinforced under Pakistan's Islamization policies—constrained women's agency, legitimized male authority, and complicated access to justice. How women are subjugated in a societal framework in Pakistani society holds significance. The article concludes that Durrani's depiction functions as both a personal testimony and a critique of institutional structures that subordinate females and it suggests avenues through which legal reform and feminist activism have sought to mitigate these harms. This paper has employed the qualitative research design to underscore the effect of Islam on lives of female characters in South Asian context in general and in Pakistani Muslim society in particular.*

Keywords: Patriarchy, *My Feudal Lord*, Islamization, Legal Framework, Hudood Ordinances, Female Rights, Pakistan, Sexists

Introduction

Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* (1991) attracts the attention of both Pakistan and international community by exposing domestic abuse, political complicity, and the social marginalization of a woman who challenge deep-rooted patriarchal power. The novel

centers on Durrani's marriage to Mustafa Khar, a powerful politician and feudal landlord, and details physical, sexual, and psychological abuse within the household. Beyond personal trauma, the memoir also foregrounds legal and religious structures that shape women's lived experiences. This paper investigates how Islamic laws—both in their interpretive social forms and in codified state legislation during the Islamization period—impact the female subjectivity portrayed in the novel. By situating the memoir within the historical context of Pakistan's legal reforms under General Zia-ul-Haq, the paper reveals the interplay between private violence and public law that has constrained women's rights and hindered recourse to justice. The novelist distinguishes between Islam as a religion of equality and its patriarchal interpretation by feudal men. Men use Islam as a means of exploiting women and retaining their supremacy. Although she cannot blame Islam that degrades women, she does not glorify Prophet Muhammad who is considered as the ideal figure by devotees to have promoted compassion, respect, and education for women.

The novelist reinterprets Islamic values in light of human rights and gender justice. Durrani portrays how Islamic laws (Shariah) are often manipulated by men to sustain power in marriage and divorce as exemplified by Khar's exploitation of his right to divorce as a tool of domination. He demonstrated how male privilege in divorce law can be abused. Although Islam allows polygamy practice under specific some conditions, men like Khar use this right by violating and discarding the accorded conditions in case they desire to marry women as per their wish. The feudal-patriarchal society justifies male violence by distorting Quranic verses about women's obedience, turning religious doctrine into an instrument of control rather than guidance. The novel functions as a social document that reveals how patriarchal readings of Islamic law perpetuate gender inequality. It also questions the legal system in Pakistan, where Hudood Ordinances often criminalized women for adultery even when they are victims of assault. Thus, the novel highlights the need of reinterpretation of Islamic scriptures to attune the rights and dignity of women as accorded in the holy books of Islam.

Literature Review

Iqra Arshad et al. have analyzed *My Feudal Lord* from the feminist perspective. Their research paper embarks on a detailed feminist examination of the struggles faced by this silenced victim, investigating the complex influences of power dynamics, societal expectations, and subtle acts of defiance that characterize her tragic yet resilient path. It aims to uncover the complexities that characterize her experience, acknowledging that her struggle goes beyond the apparent scars to embrace the emotional anguish and social stigmas that exacerbate her pain. In this endeavor, the research seeks to unveil the

widespread silence that envelops domestic violence, intending to elevate the frequently silenced voices of its victims and shed light on the significant consequences of abuse in a patriarchal society. The unspoken battles of the main character serve as a powerful backdrop for depicting the wider societal conversation about gender violence and the intricacies of marital relationships. By shedding light on the complexities of her abuse, this study aims to enhance the comprehension of the intricate dynamics of power, gender, and resistance within the particular framework of marital abuse as vividly portrayed in *My Feudal Lord*. In doing this, it aims not only to reveal the victim's unspoken struggles but also to encourage a wider societal contemplation on the factors that sustain such hidden anguish within the frequently obscured spaces of home life (839).

There is no independence and no autonomy. Living in subjugation is the worst kind of existence, as Durrani felt alongside her mother and husband. It began with physical control during her childhood, and then the intensity shifted from physical to psychological. The novel's main character lives her entire life in relentless domination. Right from the start of the novel, the authoritarian attitude of her mother is clear, influencing the perceptions, thoughts, and opinions of everyone around her. The lord's domain, with its organized layout and watchful oversight, functions as a panopticon, with Foucault influencing the lives of those living there (Inan et al 918). The narrator illustrates that existence under the feudal lord resembles life in a cage. The main character yearned for independence and release. She desired to experience a life brimming with adventures. All her aspirations crushed, and she turned into a shy and uncertain girl in the presence of Mustafa Khar (Inan et al. 919).

Nishi Singh has studied *My Feudal Lord* from the autobiographical perspective of the novelist. For Singh, Durrani's existence centered around her mother's directives, which required her to tend to her mother's bedroom and ensure that her extravagant wardrobe remained orderly. Her mother held a strong passion for her appearance and attire. Although she embraced a modern lifestyle, she rejected Western styles and insisted that the entire family adhere to Eastern fashion. Each morning before school, Durrani prepared her mother's outfit, including suitable shoes and accessories. She was aware of her mother's preference for cotton saris or fine chiffon paired with unique jewellery, which she arranged meticulously to match her mother's taste (45). Durrani states in her own terms that, "We learned that marriage was a holy and unchangeable institution. If a husband proved to be a tyrant, it was the wife's responsibility to endure until she transformed his nature. "A failed marriage highlighted a woman's shortcomings" (Durrani 29). The author was the kind of girl who was meticulously raised by her mother to be an obedient daughter, a compliant wife, and to never express her own desires (46).

Abdul Musawer et al. have highlighted the depiction of the protagonist Durrani herself who plays contradictory roles, both a victim of feudal and patriarchal violence and an agent of the power structures she later criticizes. This expression blurs the distinction between oppressors and oppressed and undermines conventional readings of the novel. Similarly, stable concepts including loyalty, love, power, etc. become internally unstable due to contradictions and ambiguities. This deconstructive interpretation of her story goes beyond feminist interpretations and reveals the novel's narrative instability, emotional ambivalence, and textual contradictions. The novel's tone and structure oscillate between challenge and nostalgia, resentment and desire, demonstrating a complex subjectivity. This study shows that moments of apparent empowerment simultaneously reinforce subjugation and demonstrate the flexibility of meaning. Derrida's approach thus demonstrates the contradictions of Durrani's narrative, showing that the novel always contradicts its own claims (3384). The study by S. Hashmat and A.U. Saleem explores Butterfly's struggles, resistance, and influence as the writers navigate the intersecting socio-cultural and political-economic environments of Pakistani society, creating an inclusive space for nuanced discussions of power relations and gender roles in Pakistan's gender topology shaped by the hegemonic nexus of globalization, neoliberalism, and popular culture. This is a qualitative study that explores the evolving sensibilities of Pakistani women using critical perspectives of Gill's postfeminist sensibilities, Dosekun's cross-cultural postfeminism, and Mohanty's Third World agentic feminism (62). The postfeminist sensibilities are underscored in this reading.

It is a parody of the famous Pakistani novel *My Feudal Lord* (1991) by Tehmina Durrani who decided to call her novel 'My Urban Lord' (Mohsin 9). She satirizes Durrani's own life while at the same time condemning the hypocrisy of elitism and the use of the victim card by Pakistani feminists. The following passage also reveals the relative position of local intellectuals in their fixed ideas about nation and culture (Hashmat&Saleem 66—7). As none of the aforementioned critics have picked the issue of Islamic laws that predominantly control the Pakistani society, this paper demonstrates the interconnectedness between women's position and male domination.

Thematic Analysis

Religious and Historical Context

To understand *My Feudal Lord* as a social document, it needs to describe the legal situation in Pakistan at the end of the 20th century. Starting in the late 1970s, the government of General Zia ul-Haq introduced a series of legal measures aimed at "Islamization". This is a

process of reshaping family law, criminal law, and public morality through the prism of conservative religious interpretation. Among the most important legal laws is the 1979 Hudud Ordinance, which redefined sexual crimes, introduced religiously framed evidentiary standards, and established sanctions based on classical Hudud (lau, dawn) punishments. This decision had practical implications far beyond the courtroom. The ruling affected police practices, societal bias, and family responses to sexual assault allegations, and often resulted in sanctions against women by both civilians and government agencies.

Durrani wrote in an environment where such legal changes were not abstract, but directly affected women's lives. The memoir was published in the early 1990s, widely distributed, and became the subject of public debate at a time when Pakistani society was grappling with the effects of the Islamization project. Legal reforms reinforced existing patriarchal practices such as feudal authority, honor codes, and gender-based movement restrictions, and transformed private control into public policy. As a result, women like Durrani who try to resist domestic violence face legal obstacles and social ostracism, complicating their desire for safety and independence.

Patriarchy and Religion

One of the central contradictions in *My Feudal Lord* is the conflation of feudal patriarchy and religious orthodoxy. Durrani's account shows how a feudal lord's control over land, patronage, and political status gave him social authority, which he often reinforced by appealing to "tradition" and religious decorum. The figure of the feudal husband as landowner and moral arbiter exemplifies a gendered power structure that uses cultural and religious rhetoric to justify oppressive practices and selectively invoke religion, while ignoring the ethical demands of justice and mercy emphasized in many Islamic teachings.

Durrani's depiction of family life shows how religious idioms are used to strengthen male power. For example, restrictions on movement, isolation of women from public life, and control of women's behavior are depicted as part of a broader moral framework that equates women's obedience with piety. This rhetorical link between religion and submission obscures the political and economic interests that support feudal rule and renders women's submission natural or sacrosanct in certain social circles. The memoir details Mr. Durrani's attempts to navigate legal institutions for divorce, financial support, and custody, a process shaped by statutory law and patriarchal jurisprudence. Pakistan's family law has historically placed restrictions on women's grounds for divorce (khura and talaq) and their financial security after separation. According to some interpretations, women seeking legal separation may face obstacles such as procedural difficulties, limited access to legal

representation, and adverse custody decisions, especially when confronted with powerful men. Durrani's struggle reflects a documented pattern in which women's access to legal means was regulated by class and power. The interplay of feudal influence and legal process meant that obtaining legal protection and enforcing court decisions often depended on women's social capital, officials' willingness to act impartially, and prevailing social attitudes shaped by conservative interpretations of gender roles.

Sexual Violence and Vulnerability of the Protagonist

The most direct legal aspect that affected women's vulnerability in the era of Islamization was the reformulation of sexual crimes within the provisions of the ZinaHudud judgment. The criminalization of forms of sexual relations outside of marriage and the imposition of traditional evidentiary requirements, such as requiring testimony to prove rape in some cases, have created a legal environment in which victims of sexual violence may be more vulnerable to prosecution. Durrani's story is about sexual coercion and violence. He condemns sexual violence. Durrani's refusal to silence thus functions not only as an act of personal resistance but also as a political intervention. By documenting violence, this memoir confronts a legal culture that privileges men's testimony and imposes structural impunity. The disclosure questions both the impunity of feudal subjects and a legal order that does not provide adequate protection for women.

Durrani's blunt first-person narration, graphic depictions of violence and moral appeals represent a strategic attempt to make personal suffering understood by the public. The distribution of the novel and the controversy it has aroused demonstrates that personal testimony can arouse public sympathy and moral concern and destabilize established powers. Formally, Durrani uses narrative rhythm, evocative details, and appeals to consciousness to frame his experiences within a familiar moral vocabulary that can be understood by readers both domestically and internationally. Memoir's ability to humanize legal and social injustice demonstrates literature's potential as a form of social criticism and legal awareness.

Legal and social changes after the peak of Islamization included reform efforts led by women's groups, lawyers, and activists. In particular, the Women's Protection (Criminal Law Reform) Act 2006 (commonly known as the Women's Protection Act) amended certain provisions of the Hudood Ordinance in order to return certain cases to secular criminal law and reduce the risk of rape victims being convicted under the Zina provisions (Lau, Science Journal). These reforms emerged from sustained efforts that combined personal testimony, legal arguments, and political mobilization. Durrani's memoir can be seen as part of a

broader public sphere that has created a space for such discussions. By highlighting the human costs of legal structures and cultural norms, *My Feudal Lord* helped create a discourse environment in which legal reform and feminist advocacy gained momentum. The relationship between mother and daughter was not normal. It was a source of embarrassment for her mother and a burden for Tefumina. Tehumina says in the novel: "When I was 12 years old, I was given the job of a dresser" (7).

The paper demonstrates the deprivation of the narrator. She recalls that she was not allowed to express her likes and dislikes. This lays the foundation for the girl's complex. To an outsider, the Durrani children's life seemed very privileged, but in reality, it was their mother's authoritarian home. All the brothers were educated in high quality schools and entered the elite ranks of Pakistani society. Her mother's power over the house and every little decision she made turned it into an eternal prison, both mentally and physically. Children were not encouraged to attend meetings and were left to work as servants and domestic help. As in traditional Pakistani families, girls in the Durrani family were not allowed to make friends freely, Durrani writes: "Avoid modern girlfriends, avoid girls with older brothers" (8). Just as prisons have their own rules and regulations, Durrani's home also have its mother's rules. On this occasion, Tefmina declares in her novel: "My childhood was filled with numerous prohibitions aimed at maintaining an indestructible distance between me and the masculine world" (8). From makeup to painting your nails to going out alone in the kitchen with a male servant, there are many things on the list that turn your home into a prison. In *My Feudal Lord*, one of the most obvious contradictions is in the character of Durrani. On the one hand, she presents herself as a victim of a patriarchal and abusive marriage. She details the physical, mental and psychological abuse she suffered under Ghulam Mustafa Khar, describing him as domineering, manipulative and controlling. But the story is unsettled by her admission that she was drawn to Carr not only because of his status, but because of his "authoritarian, conservative, controlling" nature. Besides, she leaves Anis Khan with Khan, who is described in the text as a kind and gentle man, whose domineering power and extraordinary personality influence her. This decision seems contradictory. Because Durrani seeks security and satisfaction, she enters into a relationship that ends up being the site of her deepest suffering.

His portrayal of the character Mustafa Hala is also contradictory. He is described in horrific detail as cruel, humiliating, and selfish. However, Durrani also recalls moments of weakness, such as when he asks for forgiveness, shows love to his children, and appears remorseful and guilty after he brutally beats her. These relationships overturn director Hara's image and make him seem like a mere villain. The tension between judgment and

compassion creates a story that invites the reader into an ambiguous world. This is the space in which deconstruction works. We reveal that the meaning is always debated but never fully resolved. Durrani describes the plight of women in a male-dominated society, saying that she too was a victim and suffered in silence. However, this is not the end of Mustafa's torture, and in the second part of the novel, "The Lion in the Jungle", new episodes about his infidelity arise. Durrani learns that Mustafa was having an affair with his sister Adira. Tefmina tries to protest, but Mustafa's attitude towards Durrani is shocking and Durrani's soul is shattered. She suffered deep humiliation due to her rebellion against Mustafa's relationship with her sister. Her dual nature manifested itself in horrific events in Durrani's life. She was beaten and forced to endure his beatings with her naked body.

Mustafa's gaze fell on the double-barreled shotgun leaning against the wall next to the television. In one quick motion, he reached out with his right hand, grabbed the barrel of the gun, and threw it at me. The butt of the gun hit my side. I fell down, but instinctively got back up. I cried out, "You have ruined my life" (Durrani 163). "I started screaming for Bilal for help. Mustafa stopped only when he saw obvious damage. Some of his punches were wrong. My mouth was covered in blood. Please take off your clothes. "I took off my pants. With only my bra and panties on, I looked at him, begging and pleading and crying for him to stop. But there was no time to rest. I felt the blood drying on my swollen lips and nose. With trembling fingers I took off my underwear (Durrani 164)... He sat on a chair with his arms stretched out on either side, like a king sitting on a throne. His eyes roamed over my naked body, invading me" (Durrani 165). After this horrific incident, Durrani was completely devastated and realized that Mustafa could inflict any kind of torture on his women as he considered them to be his slaves and must obey his orders without questioning his authority.

Durrani's mental state deteriorated and he completely distanced himself from Mustafa and prayed to God Almighty to give him strength. She also drew strength from her children. She began to analyze her life. She stopped reacting like a normal human being to all the insults and humiliations that Mustafa did to her. She realized that her husband had broken her spirit. He also isolated her from her family and friends. Now she has to find a solution. And she admits: Like his previous wives, I became submissive and vulnerable. Somehow I had to learn how to deal with this on another level. God answered my desperate prayer. The dust of inertia has been swept away" (Durrani 188). The novel reveals the brutal reality of domestic violence in Pakistan's feudal society. Through intimate depictions of her own experiences, Durrani paints a heartbreaking picture of a marriage defined by power imbalances, patriarchal domination, and the silent struggle of a victim trapped in a gilded

cage. This exploration delves into the insidious dynamics of this toxic relationship and explores how the protagonist navigates a world where every aspect of her life is determined by her husband, Mustafa, who embodies the essence of feudal control. From the first days of their marriage, Mustafa established control through physical and verbal violence. Durrani remembers how he “punched my face so hard my nose was bleeding”. “Don't say my name again!” Do you understand? His words are like “poisonous smoke” (Durrani 52), hurting her spirit and leaving her voice muffled. Mustafa was in front of me, looking horrified. He controls her movements, isolates her from family and friends, and even dictates her clothing, ensuring that she is completely his property under his supervision. Mustafa therefore forbade Durrani from meeting his former daughter Tania. He asks her that he doesn't want to see her cry because of his daughter. "If you love your daughter (Tania) so much, why did you marry me? I don't want to see you cry over her again. Never. Everytime ! Can you hear me? (Durrani 99). The situation highlights the painful reality of women who are deprived of visitation rights with their children.

Conclusion

The paper has analyzed *My Feudal Lord* that has been celebrated for breaking silence by scholars and critics who have pointed to limitations in its representativeness and ethical complexities. Memoirs, by nature, are subjective; questions about accuracy, selective memory, and sensationalism have been raised in reviews and scholarly critiques. Besides, focusing solely on high-profile autobiographical accounts can risk marginalizing the stories of less visible women whose struggles are equally instructive for understanding. Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* has exposed domestic abuse and political complicity within a patriarchal society in Pakistan. The memoir details Durrani's abusive marriage to politician Mustafa Khar and critiques Islamic laws that negatively influence women's experiences. It examines the legal reforms under General Zia-ul-Haq and highlights how men manipulate religious interpretations to maintain control and justify violence against women. The novel has portrayed the reinterpretation of Islamic values to promote gender equality and protect women's rights, emphasizing the need to address the distortions of Islam that enable patriarchal oppression.

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