



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 11. Issue.2. 2024 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

EXPLORING TEHMINA DURRANI'S RESILIENCE AGAINST  
PATRIARCHY AND RELIGIOUS MISINTERPRETATION IN  
*MY FEUDAL LORD*

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doi: 10.33329/ijelr.11.2.98



Article information

Article Received:13/4/2024  
Article Accepted:05/05/2024  
Published online:14/06/2024

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines Tehmina Durrani's novel *My Feudal Lord* to explore the protagonist's resilience in the face of patriarchal structures and religious misinterpretation. The study aims to unravel the complex dimensions of Durrani's narrative, focusing on her character's tenacious response to societal norms and distorted religious ideologies. Durrani's work provides a powerful critique of patriarchal dominance, highlighting the pervasive challenges faced by women in South Asia. The abstract centers on the protagonist's resilience, emphasizing her ability to resist patriarchal forces and navigate the complexities of religious misinterpretation. Durrani skillfully intertwines personal struggle with broader social commentary, offering readers a poignant reflection on the intricate interplay between gender dynamics and religious misalignment. The study goes beyond a mere analysis of oppression to explore resilience. The abstract underscores the protagonist's determination to challenge established norms and confront religious misinterpretations that perpetuate gender-based inequities. As the narrative unfolds, the study examines the layers of Durrani's storytelling, revealing a character who embodies strength and defiance amidst adversity. *My Feudal Lord* serves as a compelling literary lens through which to scrutinize the endurance of women confronting entrenched patriarchal systems and grappling with distorted religious doctrines. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender studies, offering insights into the complexities of Tehmina Durrani's narrative and the broader implications for understanding the struggles and triumphs of women in the South Asian context.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy; Resilience; Women; Islam; Islamic Feminism; Misinterpretations; Gender Justice.

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## Introduction

Tehmina Durrani is a well-known Pakistani writer, born in 1953. She is famous for her book *My Feudal Lord*, which is an autobiographical account of her life and the challenges she faced as a woman in Muslim society. Her father, Shahkur Ullah Durrani, was the former Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan and the Managing Director of Pakistan International Airlines. Tehmina Durrani is a member of the royal family of Nawab Sir Liaqat Hayat Khan, who was the Prime Minister of Patiala state for eleven years.

*My Feudal Lord*, published in 1991, became an international bestseller. It won the Italian Marissa Bellisario Prize and was translated into several regional languages. The book describes Tehmina's abusive and traumatic marriage to Ghulam Mustafa Khar, the Chief Minister and later the Governor of Punjab. It caused a stir in Pakistan's male-dominated society and brought attention to the experiences of women in Pakistani feudal society.

Tehmina Durrani has authored other books, including *A Mirror to the Blind* (1996), *Blasphemy: A Novel* (1998), and *Happy Things in Sorrow Times* (2013). *My Feudal Lord* (1991) and *Blasphemy* (1998) are still considered Pakistan's bestsellers.

## Methodology

This research paper aims to explore the resilience of Tehmina Durrani in the face of patriarchal structures and religious misinterpretation, as portrayed in *My Feudal Lord*. Through a meticulous textual analysis of the book, this study delves into the intricacies of Durrani's narrative, using the novel as a literary lens to examine how women navigate entrenched patriarchal systems and distorted religious doctrines. The primary objective of this research is to shed light on the challenges and triumphs of women in South Asia, as gleaned through a rigorous analysis of *My Feudal Lord*.

## Analysis

*My Feudal Lord* is a memoir that illustrates a wife's struggle with violence, trapped by patriarchy that is manifested through religion and ideological manipulations. The author details her husband Mustafa Khar's male-dominated nature and how he unethically used religious interpretations and his privileges of being from a feudal background to dominate his wives and states "in his feudal moral scheme, Islamic law allows a man to kill his unfaithful wife in a fit of passion, but does not allow for premeditated vengeance." (Durrani 21). Durrani lived under total subordination to her husband, Mustafa Khar, forbidding even to read the newspaper. She described her situation as follows:

Mustafa told me one day that I was not allowed to read a newspaper; I obeyed without a squeak of protest. From then on, when he found me in a room that contained newspapers, I felt caught, and prayed that he would not think that I had actually attempted to read one of them. My prayers usually went unanswered. If he walked into the room and saw a paper, he was likely to ask, 'Did you read a newspaper?' I would answer, trembling, 'No'. Invariably he raised, 'Don't lie to me!' nothing further was said. His fists did the talking. (Durrani 106)

When Tehmina married Mustafa, she found out he was already married to his fifth wife, Sherry. Despite several obstacles and her family's objections, Tehmina was able to marry Mustafa as her second husband. However, Tehmina was devastated when she discovered Mustafa's cruel nature. Sherry informed Tehmina about his mistreatment of his wife Safia when he found out about her affair with his brother. Tehmina was horrified when she learned about Mustafa's terrible and inhumane treatment of his maid, Ayesha as she states, "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 chili powder into the vagina of poor Dai Ayesha, the nanny, for not informing him of the affair." (Durrani 94). According to his fifth wife, Sherry, "Women were his obvious victims. He was out to destroy us." (Durrani 95)

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Mustafa exhibits the behavior of a traditional feudal lord and patriarch who seeks to exert complete control and subordination over his wives and maids. The first time she experienced his anger was shortly after their marriage when she had a dental appointment. He demanded that she register herself at the dentist's office as "Begum Mustafa Khar". She did not want to humiliate Sherry; she did not register herself as Mustafa's wife. To Tehmina's dismay, Sherry reported this to Mustafa and he got infuriated. He scolded Tehmina by saying, "Never – ever – disobey me! You have to do what I tell you to do." (Durrani 95). Tehmina felt that her marriage to her husband is a kind of trap in which she was losing her identity. She states, "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." (Durrani 100)

Tehmina Durrani's life is a story of her struggle for her identity and her fight against injustice and oppression. Her paintings depict the bitter experiences of her life and struggle, with unambiguous images of women being raped for the sake of power and domination. Following her marriage, Mustafa abused her in the name of counterfeit religious beliefs. However, Tehmina held onto her true religious beliefs and used them to protect herself from her husband's wrath. In her work, Durrani illustrates how men like her husband distort true Islamic values and religious teachings in order to justify their actions and subjugate their wives. He would often justify subjugation of his wives through a distorted version of Islamic teaching. Durrani states:

'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. I interpreted the Koran differently. To me land had to be tended and cultivated; only then could it produce in abundance. Otherwise, it would be barren. But of course, I was expected to accept Mustafa's interpretation without question. (Durrani 107)

Durrani challenges traditionalism in her novels and explores a world where gender equality can be envisioned and exercised, despite a dictatorial patriarchal regime. She argues that the disparity between true Islamic teachings and the practices of Muslim men puts Muslim women's lives in serious danger. Durrani also highlights that she was unable to express her feelings of sexual pleasure in her relationship with her husband. Her husband, Mustafa Khar, saw this as a sign of an adulterous wife, which further illustrates the patriarchal mindset that women face in their daily lives. Durrani states, "This was a feudal hang-up: his class believed that a woman was an instrument of man's carnal pleasure. If a woman ever indicated that she felt pleasure, she was a potential adulterous, not to be trusted." (Durrani, 106-107)

Tehmina illustrated the extent of physical violence and abusive language she endured from Mustafa. She recalls her agony and vindictive experiences of physical assault in her marriage with Mustafa Khar:

...suddenly he threw me down onto the bed and jumped on me, sitting astride my valley, he slapped in the face repeatedly with his open palm, forehand and back hand. He threw me against a wall, picked me up and threw me against another one- again, and again, and again. I no longer knew what was happening. I did not know how long the beating lasted. It could have been 10 minutes; it could have been 2 hours; the intensity made it eternity. (Durrani 102-103)

She also pronounces another incident of her brutal treatment at the hands of her husband, Mustafa Khar, she states:

On another occasion he kicked me down a staircase. When I landed at the bottom in a mangled heap, he ran down the stairs and resumed his savage kicks and blows. I cried out: this is my father's house and I do not think that you should dare to lift your hand on me here! (Durrani 134)

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The most concrete testament to autonomy could be that *My Feudal Lord* is Tehmina's journey of her struggle to fight for the right to live with dignity and respect as an individual; rather, an abusive and submissive wife of the patriarchs, the typical feudal lords of the Pakistani society. Her novel reveals the harsh truths of the miseries of Pakistani Muslim women who undergo suffering- mental and physical. Tehmina's story is the representation of the abused married life of the majority of Pakistani women. Although her work is based on the lives of women in Pakistani society, her narratives carry the elements of universality and timelessness in the manner that they explore women's sufferings and subjugation at the hands of a male-dominated society. Her story reveals women's plight in general.

Srivastava and Singh rightly points out that Durrani's novel, *My Feudal Lord* explores the plight and endless suffering of Muslim women at the hands of real patriarchs of Pakistani society who have the feudal mentality to control and subjugate their women like their lands. They describe that Durrani's novel demonstrates how women are treated as personal property and assets of males in third-world nations like Pakistan, where men control every aspect of women's lives, including their behaviour and movements. (159)

Durrani exposes the pictures of exploited women who rarely dare to move to the law for justice because the law is specifically structured to benefit powerful patriarchs like Mustafa Khar. Between the structure of powerful and powerless, women in a patriarchal and male-controlled setup, were at the receiving end. In a patriarchal Pakistani society, justice is in the hands of leaders who very well exercise the power of politics to control their women. Divorce is considered a woman's failure as well as a disgrace for her family in Muslim patriarchal societies. Wazir, Mustafa's wife suffered humiliation and isolation in his village, where she was ignored and finally divorced by Mustafa. Durrani illustrates her pathetic condition as:

Back home, Wazir suffered in silence. Her humiliation was compounded when the elders dissolved her marriage to Mustafa and gave her to her much younger brother-in-law. But at least she was spared the indignity of returning to her parents' home as a divorcee-which, in the feudal system, is a dismal destiny. (Durrani 42)

In the manifestation of patriarchy, every action of men is justified by society. Mustafa divorced his other wife, Firdaus, at a critical juncture of life, when she was admitted to the hospital to deliver her baby. Durrani elucidates, "Even as Firdaus was in the hospital recuperating from Billoo's birth, Mustafa sent her divorce papers. Somewhat chastened, Mustafa returned to his village and - the typically feudal fashion- was forgiven by his elders." (Durrani 42). Mustafa married a flight attendant, Safia, and placed her in his village, Kot Addu. He limited her freedom and confined her role in the family as a mere slave in his home. Durrani expresses her condition in the following words:

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 her mission was to live in anticipation of his infrequent visits. 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 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 the *zannana* (women's chambers) where in every sense the male was king and the female slave. (Durrani 45)

Tehmina pointed out that it's unfortunate that many men in Muslim societies use Islam to justify their actions and try to gain privileges from their own interpretations of the religion while ignoring its actual teachings. Durrani shared an incident when Mustafa Khar married a professional dancer named Naubahar, despite already being married. When political pressure arose to save his reputation, Mustafa divorced her. Durrani expressed her agony:

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Mustafa rented a house in Lahore and installed Naubahar there as his mistress. Then he married her, despite the fact that he had a wife waiting for him in Kot Addu. (The Koran allows a man to have as many as four wives, but tempers this with the almost impossible requirement that he loves them equally.) He made Naubahar promise to keep the marriage a secret. (Durrani 49)

Her marriage to the feudal lord Mustafa had devastated her so much that the only way was to bring to the fore the violence, humiliation, and subjugation faced by women confined in marital institutions and make other women realise their potential which was stifled and stunted by patriarchal violence. This was a huge task that could only be done by setting an example, or rather being the example herself and telling her personal story to the world that women alone are not born to carry the burden of marriage and continue the disrespecting, abusive, and humiliating marriages. She declared: "I decided to cast a stone at hypocrisy. I decided to write this book and break the traditional silence." (Durrani 375). After her prolonged struggle for her own identity, dignity, and individuality, she finally got custody of her children and the right to live as an individual. She rightly announced: "Well, Mustafa, now the world will soon know you only as Tehmina Durrani's ex-husband." (Durrani 382)

### Conclusion

Tehmina Durrani is a progressive woman who raised her voice against the patriarchal social structure of Pakistani society, the feudal system, and practices imposed on women in the name of Islam. In her autobiographical novel, *My Feudal Lord*, she outlined her story of fighting against the oppression, exploitation, and injustice done by her husband Mustafa Khar, a typical patriarch and feudal lord. She also sheds light on the plight of other wives of Mustafa Khar who were victims of atrocities inflicted by the feudal lord.

Durrani highlights that in Pakistan, due to the conservative interpretation of Islam and socio-cultural norms of masculine authority, feminine obedience serves men's legitimacy of violence perpetrated on women's body leaving a permanent scar on their memory. She stands with a balanced approach regarding her religion and celebrates the true spirit of Islam in her novel. She believes that patriarchal institutions are responsible for the marginalized state of women and shows how women assert their female identity.

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