Women in Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord: A Feminist Study*

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**Abstract**

The present study discusses the pejorativestate of women in a third world country where they are dispossessed of identity, name, social standing, right of choice and even progenies who are the extensions of their own selves indeed. Kristeva’s feministic views (1980, 1983, 1986, 2008) have been employed to analyze and interpret the life of a woman in a male chauvinistic society. The plight of Tehmina Durrani (the author) in her memoir *My Feudal Lord* (1995) has been selected to reconnoiter the macho-ascendency and the subservience of women in a third world country, Pakistan.

**Keywords**: Patriarchy, Male chauvinism, Suppression of Women, Feministic Enquiry, Julia Kristeva, Semiotic / Symbolic distinction, Pakistani Literature, Tehmina Durrani
Introduction

The paper is a feminist reading of Tehmina Durrani’s memoir My Feudal Lord (1995) in the light of French feminist Julia Kristeva’s notion of semiotic and symbolic distinction. Feminism, as a discipline, is an advocate of the equal social eminence of the females. In the history of human civilization many political, social and cultural movements have been contested to claim equal rights for women. Feminism is a dogma, a creed which is characterized by miscellaneous perspectives and movements intended to support the women rights. According to Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature, feminism is “A doctrine advocating social and political rights for women equal to those of men” (Snowdgrass, 2006: 656). The dictionary of literary terms defines, “Feminism is an attempt to describe and interpret women’s experiences as depicted in various kinds of literature. It questions the long standing, dominant, male interpretation in literature”. (Cudden, 1998: 7). According to Barkty, “Women’s oppression under male domination not only consists of solely in depriving women of political and legal rights but also extends into the structure of our society and the contents of our culture and permeates our consciousness”. (Barkty, 1990: 63). In a nutshell, feminism is the conviction that society is prejudicial towards women, and it deprives them of individual choice, political authority, economic prospects and intellectual power-show in a very conscious and systematic manner.

Durrani’s memoir My Feudal Lord (1995) is a personification of aforesaid definitions of feminism. It covers all the aspects concerning differences, binaries and identity issues which show women’s subjugated place in Pakistan. Kristeva’s feminist concept of Semiotic vs Symbolic distinctions are appropriate to analyze the text of Durrani’s memoir. Kristeva is of the view that a child naturally inclines towards his/her mother. She terms this inclination as ‘semiotic’. But later the ‘symbolic’ structure of society shifts his/her inclination towards father as
he/she observes the father’s authority and supremacy. This semiotic / symbolic controversy constructs a complex cobweb, which is very difficult to rip off. In Durrani’s memoir (1995) it is the male social order which created a chauvinistic figure, Mustafa Khar. Khar, the male character of the memoir was not a born autocrat, but society taught him the art of autocracy against women. There are many occurrences in the story which display that the source of women’s suppression and men’s domination lies in social discrimination.

**Review of the Previous Literature**

Historical and literary studies reveal that much has been done to make women noticeable and visible. The prominent works are Sheila Rowbotham’s *Hidden from History* (1973); Ellen Moer’s *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1976); Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977). Feminist approach accentuated not only the differences but with also the hierarchy. Men, the more dominant than women, impose their own concepts and definitions on the masculine / feminine identities. Beauvoir (1949) claims that man has fabricated and constructed woman as ‘The Other’; as the one who is not oneself. Whatever characterizes men, in their own view indeed, women are defined as the opposite. “If men are active, women must be passive, if men represent good, then women must represent evil. In other words, all the negative characteristics of humanity as men perceive them are projected onto women” (23). Mishra (2006) says about feminism, “The notion of being a woman should not be guided by the dictates of the patriarchal society” (21). Concerning language and its symbolic implications and meanings, Shree (2002) mentions, “It is difficult for women to express their feelings in a language which is chiefly made by men to express their” (28). While speaking about *My Feudal Lord* (1995), she argues, “The book is a milestone for the cause of women in Pakistan. It should be recognized as a stepping stone for women, who are mothers, sisters, wives and
daughters’ (Shree, 2002: 114). Khar is in fact the product of the feudal society where women are no more than just material articles and objects. He is a person possessed with absolute authority and power and that power needed to be practiced to confirm its existence. The ‘safest’ territory and zone was his own place, i.e. his home, where no one ventured to deny his authority. He would beat up and punish the servants if the food was not hot enough, his wife if she was late after his first call, and his children if they threw a tantrum (Shree, 2002: 121). At a place, talking about same phenomenon, Shree says, “This behavior is not limited to Pakistan only. Domestic violence is probably one of the worst cultural universals” (Shree, 2002: 120). Numerous articles have also been written on this issue. Sunday Times (cited in Durrani, 1995) wrote about Durrani’s work: “Tehmina Durani’s story provides extra ordinary insights into the vulnerable position of women caught in the complex web of society” (N.P). In 2013 Baseer, Alvi and Zafran have written a paper applying Kristeva’s perspective of semiotic and symbolic language to explore Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House*. The paper concludes that “patriarchy establishes the ideas of man’s ascendancy and woman’s relegation on the basis of symbolic concepts associated with male-dominated linguistic code, and not on the basis of semiotic use of language” (Baseer, Alvi & Zafran, 2013: 622). Several PhD theses applying Julia Kristeva’s notions on novels and short stories are completed at the well-known universities of England like University of Liverpool, University of Sussex, Queen’s University of London, University of Stirling, University of Leeds and Brunel University. Elaine Catherine has researched on the topic of ‘Resistant spaces in Kristeva and Foucault, and their literary formation in Barnes and Lorde’ for his doctoral degree in 1999. Earlier, a research has been carried out in 1983 by Murphy. The title of the research is ‘The semiology of fiction in the work of Julia Kristeva, 1966-1976’. The research is about the semiology of fiction in the work of Kristeva. Elisha’s thesis (2011) ‘A theoretical account of

Sally Potter's film The Gold Diggers (1983) occupies an important place in the cultural politics of feminism. It poses the question of female subjectivity through a critical exploration of the structuring linearity of classic narrative film. Casting Julie Christie and Colette Laffont as co-stars, the film explores the relationship between the female spectator and two cinematic portraits: the over-exposed white female star and the under-represented black woman. Mobilised by their mutual desire for change, the white star escapes her pre-given status of screen goddess and the black woman adopts the role of investigative agent. Bringing together two women who have been divided by constructs of race, class and culture, Sally Potter is disrupting a prohibited story and making it possible within the parameters of feminist intervention in the cinema (Louise Ann, 1994).

Anna Jane’s doctoral thesis ‘Endangered bodies: woman and nature in the contemporary British novel by women’ (2004) is a feminist analysis of contemporary British gynotexts.

This project examines the ecofeminist premise that discourses of mastery not only affect subjugated others such as women, animals and others, but also influence the treatment of the natural environment. Analyzing novels that employ forms of embodiment that foreground extreme bodily conditions such as pregnancy, monstrosity and death, I employ the theoretical constructs of Mikhail Bakhtin (the grotesque body, cannibalization and dialogism) and Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection as tools of analysis to provide a new conception of ecological bodies (Anna Jane, 2004).

**Conceptual / Methodological Framework**

This paper is based on Kristeva’s feminist view of repressed or semiotic way of representation that ultimately loses its unique identity in male-controlled, patriarchal, symbolic social order and finally becomes the part of it. Though Kristeva is a linguist yet her concepts and notions are of great significance for feminist theories. She herself says, “I am quite dedicated to the feminist movement” (cited in Roudiez, 1981: 10). Kristeva offers her feminist conceptions by providing the notions of Symbolic and Semiotic modes of communication and representation. Semiotic thread / mode deals with usual and natural meaning. She looks at the symbolic thread / mode as
the language of power and confront, and, as such, is aligned and associated with patriarchal functions in human culture. In Kristeva’s model, the developing child turns to the subjective approach in relation to the symbolic functions of language. The child attaches and inserts himself / herself into culture by submitting and surrendering to the father’s ‘no’ as well as by following and conforming to the linguistic rules, and this process is related to the child’s insertion into social rules. Since the outer social world is patriarchal and masculine, it is essential to learn the language of the father in order to learn the language of the world. This progression finally leads to the child’s alienation and separation from the mother. “The learning of symbolic language, therefore, necessitates a submission to masculine functions and a farewell to feminized space of mother-child bond” (Robbins, 2000: 128).

Kristeva points out that patriarchy creates the designs of Men’s supremacy and Women’s otherliness on the basis of symbolic or cultural perception and not the natural ones. While both are inseparable, attached and independent. Repression or subjugation of one and dominance and control of other causes threat to the smooth and even running of social order. Several relevant extracts from the text of My Feudal Lord (1995) by TehminaDurrani have been cited and analyzed to show the plight of women being browbeaten and exploited by men on the basis of patriarchal cultural concepts constructed around the power of men-folk.

**Analysis**

Durrani’s autobiography My Feudal Lord (1995) clearly shows her distressing matrimonial life with an imperialist feudal lord, named GhulamMustafa Khar. Khar, a notable politician in the history of Pakistani politics, is a former chief minister of Punjab. Apparently, he is a projectingsupporter of democracy, while in the personal affairs of his life he is no more than an incurable wife-abuser. The memoir is distributed into three parts known as (1) Lion of Punjab (2)
Law of Jungle (3) Lioness. All three parts visibly map the growth of Tehmina Durrani from an ordinary and insignificant aristocratic house wife to an emancipated, liberated woman who is fighting for equal rights.

*My Feudal Lord* (1995) is the true archetype of women’s plight and their repressed condition. It has been written unambiguously and specifically in Pakistani context referring to the plight of women in patriarchal symbolic order. The selected text has a peculiar and specific background which is apt keeping in view Kristeva’s notion of symbolic and semiotic order, upholding that symbolic social order makes women remain at the mercy of what the men in their lives and society consider best for them. Kristeva argues, “Symbolic order is man’s world only. It dominates even the primary pleasures of women (cited in Jones, 1974: 58). Though Durrani’s work (1995) was marked as blasphemous on certain grounds yet the fact remained firm at its place that her work represents and shows the real picture of subjugation of women in third world countries on one hand, while on other it brings to scene the unjust ruling of patriarchy which is directly responsible for the present discriminatory state of women. The book also offers many strategies to build resistance and create awareness regarding women’s plight. Durrani’s work illustrates that in third world countries like Pakistan, women are taken as personal properties and possessions of men since men control every sphere of lives of women even their behaviour and movements. Men have the right and full command to make decisions for women and women have to follow their decisions in family, tribe, community and society. We find that feudal lord Khar does not allow Durrani even to talk to her own brother. Once, he grew very upset when she talked to her brother Asim on the phone. He shouted “Why did you speak to him for so long” he growled, “Is he your brother or your lover?” (Durrani, 1995: 133). She looked at her violent husband and replied in astonishing manner, “He is my brother, Mustafa, really” (133). On her
reply, he gets more shabby and cruel stating: “Are you answering me back?” (133). Mustafa Khar performs the true role of a patriarch and of a masculine oppressor as well as an unjust, unruly man. In another episode, Durrani was not allowed to read a newspaper and she was supposed to obey without any protest, otherwise, “His fists did the talking” (106). Even Khar’s old mother was not free of this charge against women. At the dinner table, he used to command his mother, “Eat up”. His mother began to eat. Whenever she muttered that she had lost her appetite, Khar turned a hate stare upon her and spouted obscenities. Quickly, she pecked at her food. Durrani writes, “A feudal lord was an absolute ruler who could justify any action” (41).

Durrani’s work (1995) shows various examples of this type of patriarchal insolence. She is snubbed and ridiculed throughout her life not to shun and go against this social order, the symbolic order in Kristeva’s terminology. Whenever she tried to come out of it she was beaten by her husband. Tehmina Durrani states, “Later, in our bedroom, my insolence was punished with yet another sharp slap. He called me an exhibitionist, a woman without shame” (216).

Conclusion

Our part of the world gives a greater emphasis on male dominant order. Women have always been made to suffer from disappointment, disillusionment, and frustration which arise from social restrictions. Almost every woman faces harsh criticism like that of Durrani, who tries to write in a courageous manner about the male-centered society as well as by protesting against it. The paper concludes that the each and every woman must learn to confront the contentious tenets which have been considered truths since centuries. The researchers intend to bring the issue of women’s relegation to an incessant scrutiny, so that the condition of women can be upgraded.
References


