

Forging the Conscience of her Race: Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*

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Abstract

All across the world, especially in the Indian sub-continent, the act of writing is for a woman essentially an act of breaking her silence because her repressive patriarchal/racial society has taught her to be culturally silent. The feminine is essentially the marginalized consciousness that operates on the periphery of patriarchal discourse. Such an insight into the marginal self is provided by Tehmina Durrani's My Feudal Lord. Professionally a charismatic champion of democracy, on the personal front her husband Gulam Mustafa Khar was an inveterate wife abuser. This article examines the trajectory of Tehmina's experience to elaborate how patriarchal discourse limits and transcribes the image and identity of Tehmina but she inverts the social and familial constraints to emerge as a new woman. She strives against all odds to escape all forms of essential categorizing that render the subaltern or minority woman both the victim and unwilling perpetrators of damning stereotypical metaphors both by Eurocentric imperialism and the patriarchal tenets of her Islamic society, the power politics in Pakistani Government and the social ethos of Pakistani marital life.

Keywords:

Post colonialism, gender, feminism, postmodernism, identity, subaltern, patriarchy.

Post-colonial feminist writing is extensive and variable. Its analyses range across representations of women in formerly colonized countries and in Western locations. Criticism and analyses have focused on the constructions of gender differences during the colonial period; with the representations of women in post-colonial discourses; with special reference to the work of women writers. At the level of theory, postcolonial feminist critics have raised a number of conceptual, methodological and political problems involved in the study of the representations of gender. It is as challenging to define feminism as it is to define post-colonialism. The variable range of work that can be called 'feminist' makes it difficult to summarize feminism. One can begin with a reading of the introduction to *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (ed. Belsely and Moore, Macmillan, 1989). Catherine Belsely and Jane Moore argue that a feminist reader is *enlisted in the process of changing the gender relations which prevail in our society and she regards the practice of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change* (Belsely, Catherine and Moore, 1). They suggest that a

feminist reader might ask of a text questions about gender relations such as *how it defines sexual difference* (Belsely, Catherine and Moore, 1). In referring to the 'struggle for change' we can understand that feminist reading practices are involved in the contestation of patriarchal authority. The term 'patriarchy' refers to those systems-----political, material, social, cultural and imaginative----- which invest power in men and marginalize women. Like colonialism, patriarchy asserts certain representational systems which create an order of the world presented to the individuals as normal or true. Also like colonialism, patriarchy exists in the midst of resistances to its authority. There are various forms and levels of patriarchy. This is a particularly important point in the post-colonial feminist criticism. So feminism and post-colonialism share the mutual goal of challenging forms of oppression. Third world feminist writers cover a range of issues that share a concern with gender ----how their female protagonist's self and sexuality are constructed and controlled by indigenous patriarchies and British colonial practices. Further they show how patriarchy and colonialism collude to worsen a woman's predicament. Although women writers do not romanticize a pre-colonial past, they are well aware of how indigenous and colonial patriarchies collude as represented in Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangaremba's complex first novel *Nervous Conditions*. Even as patriarchy is critiqued Third World theorists reveal the historical and cultural specificities of patriarchy.

We live in a world with powerful histories of resistance and revolution in daily life' (Mohanty, 4) notes Chandra Mohanty in her introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. She asserts that *these challenges suggest new questions for feminist historiography and epistemology as well as point toward necessary re-conceptualizations of ideas of resistance, community and agency in daily life* (Mohanty, 4). Mohanty does not posit any homogeneous configuration of third world women who form communities because they share a gender or a race or a nation (Mohanty, 5). Her essay "Under Western Eyes" demonstrates the problems in associating third world women with images of underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism and other stereotypical concepts. Mohanty suggests a useful direction in stating that *any definitions, descriptions and interpretations of third world women's engagement with feminism must necessarily be simultaneously historically specific and dynamic, not frozen in time in the form of a spectacle* (William and Chrisman, 196). Just as there is no single homogeneous category of western women similarly there is no automatic unitary group of third world women..... *It is Third World women's oppositional political relation to sexist, racist and imperialist structures that constitutes our potential commonality* (William and Chrisman, 220)

Post-colonial literature consists of a body of writing emanating from Europe's former colonies. It addresses the concerns of history, identity,

history, ethnicity, gender and language. The term “postcolonial literature” is to date one of the most convenient and flexible ways of embracing the gamut of literary responses to the challenges presented by decolonization and the transition to independence and post independence in a variety of political and cultural contexts. An important consequence of post-colonialism has been the acknowledgement and reappearance of women's experience after being concealed from the histories of colonial societies. Many of the fixed representations of non-Western women have been powerfully rejected in a plethora of contemporary writings; most of them in their different ways refute western imaginings about them. Writers like Jean Rhys, Anita Desai, Buchi Emecheta, Olive Senior, Nadine Gordimer, Grace Nichols and Arundhati Roy, observes Nabaneeta Dev Sen, have placed women at the centre of history as makers and agents of history, not mute witnesses to it. Writing is an extremely difficult task and has been regarded primarily as male territory. Now of course women have stormed this bastion but have usually been regarded as trespassers. The woman who writes has stepped out of her own perceived area of the senses and appropriated a male gesture. When a woman writes she is not just describing life as we witness it, but is rather transcribing experience into words. Critical dogmas, a patriarchal experience, often distract her from the concrete to the abstract and create academic distance between her and reality. All across the world, especially in the Indian sub-continent, the act of writing is for a woman essentially an act of breaking her silence because her repressive patriarchal/racial society has taught her to be culturally silent. The feminine is essentially the marginalized consciousness that operates on the periphery of patriarchal discourse. Such an insight into the marginal self is provided by Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*.

Tehmina Durrani, a Pakistani English author, in her autobiography *My Feudal Lord* describes her traumatic marital life with Gulam Mustafa Khar, an important politician in the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto government, who later became the Chief Minister of Punjab. Professionally a charismatic champion of democracy, on the personal front he was an inveterate wife abuser. This autobiographical novel won the Italian Marissa Bellasario prize and was later translated into several languages. *My Feudal Lord* is divided into three parts respectively aptly entitled Lion of Punjab, Law of Jungle, and Lioness. Throughout these sections one can map the progress of Tehmina from an ordinary elitist housewife to an emancipated human being contesting for equal rights and women's empowerment. In Pakistani society, where the Muslim patriarchs dominate, the entity of women is that of inferior beings, both intellectually and socially. Her main *raison d'être* seems to be an instrument for the satisfaction of the man's sexual desires and perpetuation of the species. Tehmina herself was no exception to this

rule and fashioned herself mechanically to cater to her husband's preferences, be it in appearance, attire or makeup. Moreover she reveled in the conventional social expectations of the behaviour expected of a married woman. Tehmina writes:

The women in our circle did not seem to look beyond their raised noses. They chattered endlessly about disobedient servants, clothes, jewellery and interior decorations.... Many a day in the lives of these women was completely devoted to the topic of what to wear that evening (Durrani, 65).

In the first part of *My Feudal Lord*, Mustafa is portrayed as a man who revels in the total subjugation, repression and oppression of his female counterpart. Tehmina's conventional upbringing, conditioned by her patriarchal social 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. That was the social ethos which inculcated itself into her being. Her mother's comment aptly illustrates this:

If a husband behaves in a strange or unreasonable manner, you should treat him like a sick human being, like someone who needs medical care and treatment. Deal with him like a psychiatrist (Durrani, 130).

Yet Mustafa is neither sick nor unreasonable. He is simply insanely and irrationally possessive in a manner reminiscent of the Duke of Ferrara in Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*. For, according to Mustafa, a woman, like land, is "power, prestige and a property" - a commodity meant for utilization and consumption in whichever way the owner / master deems fit. Surprisingly, when Tehmina becomes pregnant as a result of Mustafa's violent rapist tortures, he takes a lot of personal care of her. However, a close reading of the novel makes the reader realize that it is not out of love for her but in the hope of a male heir that Mustafa is attending to Tehmina. Her endurance of Mustafa's tortures is the result of an archaic patriarchal value which inculcates a sense of slavery into the essence of womanhood. This extends to sexual domination of the wife by the husband. Patriarchal discourse does not regard sex as a means of mutual physical enjoyment but rather as a tool of dominion. This is why Tehmina tries to perpetuate her marriage bond with Mustafa, realizing fully well that in her society, a divorced woman is the most despicable of the human species. Her heart-rending description of her loveless marriage is revealed as:

There was not a day that Mustafa did not hit me I just tried my best not to provoke him ...I was afraid that my slightest response to his advances would reinforce his image of me as a common slut. This was a feudal hang – up: his class believed 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. Mustafa did not even

realize that he had crushed my sensuality. I was on automatic pilot ...responding as much as was important for him but never feeling anything myself. If he was satisfied there was a chance that he would be in better humour. It was at these times that I realized that prostitution must be a most difficult profession (Durrani, 127).

Part Two of the novel is set in a politically turbulent atmosphere of General Zia's coup, overthrowing the Government of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and establishing a military regime. Mustafa, a Bhutto loyalist now falls from grace in the new regime and along with Tehmina, goes to London via Mecca. Before leaving his country, Mustafa promises the Government of General Zia that he will bring back some important documents from London and these will help in the total liquidation of the Bhutto Government and will thus prove Mustafa's loyalty to the present military regime of Pakistan. Yet once Mustafa reaches London, his dilemma is resolved and he decides to remain loyal to the Bhutto Government and so he starts contacting all possible exiles there. In London Mustafa and Tehmina start a fashionable life as exiles. At this point both Tehmina and her family have accepted Mustafa with all his perversions and atrocities and they are living in an apartment owned by Tehmina's parents who want their daughter and son-in-law to live happily together. They also urge the two not to file for divorce. Her father tells her:

You can only leave his home in a coffin (Durrani, 126).

Emboldened by his father-in-law's approval and attitude, Mustafa starts behaving as before and to make matters worse, he begins seducing Tehmina's younger sister Adila, while physically assaulting Tehmina regularly. Overcome by his physical assaults, Tehmina finally raises her voice telling him:

This is my father's house and I do not think that you should dare to lift a hand on me here (Durrani, 134).

However her protests become feeble once she realizes that her family will not support her at all and she can hardly hope to receive support from anyone else. Left with no material and mental support and with the hope of a bleak future before her, Tehmina reconciles yet again with her brute of a husband. Her only consolation is in the power of the Almighty to whom she prays constantly to alleviate her sufferings and to make her husband realize his shortcomings. The last straw comes after Tehmina becomes pregnant again and unforeseen circumstances compel her to visit a male doctor. This hurts Mustafa's enormous ego and he sees Tehmina's visit to a male doctor as an unforgivable transgression whereby she has insulted his manhood and his right over her as her husband. He beats the pregnant Tehmina brutally. This is an insight into the sexual ego of the feudal master who treats his wife as a possession. For the first time in her life she considers divorce but realizes that she

might have to forgo her right over her daughter. So she once again reconciles with her destiny:

A prisoner ultimately settles into a monotonous routine. Anger recedes, senses dull. The spirit is crushed (Durrani, 143).

Politics in Pakistan begins changing with the execution of Bhutto in 1979. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan helps Zia consolidate his position in the domestic politics of Pakistan with the support of the American Government. Bhutto's sons mobilize the support and sympathy of a large number of Pakistani people in exile. And this exiled community dreams of dislodging Zia forcibly. Mustafa senses the futility of this attempt and feels that this revolutionary group aiming at overthrowing the Zia Government will strengthen Zia and give him an excuse to eliminate all the supporters of Bhutto who were still in Pakistan. So Mustafa changes his potential strategy. He starts traveling the entire continent, mobilizing support from those in exile, tirelessly delivering lectures at public meetings for a sensible change in the Government of Pakistan. At this stage of his life and career, he appears to be a champion of democracy in public life, although he is still an inveterate wife-abuser in his private life. His words enthuse Tehmina and she starts believing that soon her country shall be free from the clutches of martial law imposed by the military government.

In the course of time, Mustafa develops an incestuous relationship with Adila, his sister-in-law, which is subsequently discovered by Tehmina. Yet Tehmina blames not her husband but her sister for and complains about the affair to her mother that her sister has been seducing Mustafa. The reason for Tehmina's one-sided complaint is that she may protect her husband's honour in her parent's house. But the results of these are drastic as Mustafa batters her with the butt of his double-barrelled shotgun and strips her nude, taking away from her even the last vestige of security. This episode has an oppressive effect on her soul and she describes:

This episode would cripple my spirit perhaps beyond salvation. From this movement forward it would be nearly impossible for me to function as an individual. There was not one iota of self-esteem left. The shame had burned it down to ashes. (Durrani, 165).

The basic teaching imparted to every woman in a patriarchal society is to remain a silent spectator, even as a victim to any injustice meted out by the man and to be very careful of not going public with any personal crisis which may harm the "honour" of her man. However even social constraints have their limits and one day Tehmina cannot take it any more. So Tehmina retorts in fury when he next tries to hit her:

The next time you raise your hand on me. I will pick- up a knife and kill you (Durrani, 165).

After this warning, Tehmina remains with her husband and visits India with a diplomatic mission. After the meeting, she visits the Holy Shrine of Ajmer and her prayer reveals her deep devoutness and reverence for her religion:

My two shadows were at my side as I entered the shrine. Their Hindu presence disturbed my Islamic prayers.....I asked God to curb Mustafa's bouts of violence and insanity. I want a normal home with peace and harmony. I prayed that God would give Mustafa respect and end in exile (Durrani, 188).

After their return from India, Mustafa and Tehmina file for separation under the court of law in England. This is granted, and after the legal separation, Tehmina decides to cut her hair thereby sending a message to Mustafa that she will never return to him, as he had been besotted with her beautiful hair and the act of cutting it is symbolic of her cutting him out her existence. She writes:

He knew that I had finally decided not to return to him ever again. Otherwise I would not have done away with what he loved most about me. Without my hair he was a weak Samson (Durrani, 233).

However now that she has forsaken him, Mustafa's male ego is affronted and he begins wooing her back with a vengeance. Eventually he succeeds in winning her over by enthusing her with his noble mission of returning home to rescue his country from the clutches of its martial Government. A kind of ideological affinity makes the two of them return together to Pakistan upon which Mustafa is immediately arrested at the airport. Tehmina, being his wife, receives much public attention and is for the first time accepted as a leader of the people. Being a dutiful wife, legal separation notwithstanding, Tehmina visits the jailed Mustafa regularly and tries to mobilize public support for him. He has no alternative except her and so he controls his temper. Eventually however his perversions dominate him and his lust for her resurfaces making him rape her in jail on his birthday. Tehmina is physically ravaged by the wounds he inflicts as she is still recovering from surgery. This ends her optimistic endurance and she applies for the Islamic "*Khula*" or divorce granted to a woman as long as she relinquishes all her claims to property. Mustafa tries desperately to prevent the termination of their marriage because she is the sole means of his release from jail. So successfully does he brainwash her into dreaming of an ideal society and envisioning him as the champion of democracy that she relentlessly and successfully campaigns for his release. When Mustafa emerges from jail his real self is revealed - he is not the champion of the downtrodden masses, but the same selfish, jealous, egoistic and possessive man. Amazed at the public image and support built by Tehmina around herself, he raves with jealousy and does not acknowledge all her efforts in his release from jail and, on the domestic front resumes his illicit relationship with his sister-

in-law Adila. Tehmina, however, is no longer docile, compromising, submissive and tolerant. As she tells him in the presence of all:

Your marriage according to the Koran, was over years ago when you slept with my sister, I have been living with you in sin. The contract stood null and void long ago (Durrani, 362).

She now decides to complete the divorce proceedings and also begins to write an autobiography. She believes that ethical compulsions demand this act of courage and she owes it to her closed and repressive society to reveal the deepest personal secrets of her life. The new emancipated Tehmina has a courage born out of endurance oppression, and believes that:

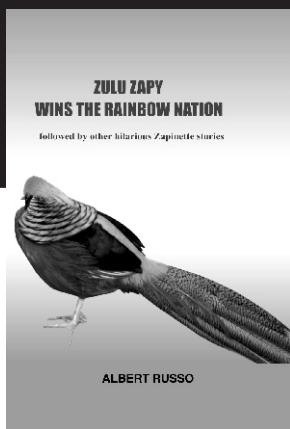
Silence condones injustice, breeds subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy. Mustafa Khar and other feudal lords thrive and multiply on silence. Muslim women must learn to raise their voice against injustice (Durrani, 375).

The inter-related topology of gender, space and ethnicity in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* gestures towards a possible resolution of the expressive dilemma articulated by Virginia Woolf in her comment on women's writing: *A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best, it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in what we mean by feminine* (Showalter, 247). For Tehmina Durrani, the feminine is the marginalized consciousness that operates on the periphery of patriarchal discourse. However the marginalized or peripheral consciousness can centre itself through a radical act of subversion by turning the master discourse inside out as it were----- by reconfiguring the periphery as the frontier or point of entry into an alternate realm of possibility. The new Janus-faced identity is capable of negotiating multiple realities as it looks back towards the periphery and forwards to the frontier and can hence be re-conceptualized as being empowered instead of marginalized. The duality of this vision underscores the potentialities rather than the problematics of the marginalized self----- marginalized both in terms of identity and gender. The socially passive and culturally silenced female voice is suddenly focalized and vocalized as being assertive and empowered through the very act of self-expression. Space is a crucial ingredient of this topography. Space functions in discourse as a mimetic concept since spaces, literal as well as metaphorical are very often culturally constructed imperialist and / or patriarchal 'mapping' of experience. Destabilising space and the markers that define it in the dominant discourse is one way of claiming agency. Through negotiating gender, space and identity Tehmina Durrani interrogates the very basis of the relationship posited between gender, spatial and cultural location and identity. Tehmina Durrani becomes not one of Homi Bhabha's shadowy and derivative neo-colonial 'mimic men' (the products of mimesis) whose identities are subsumed within the externally imposed metaphor but the activator of

fresh analogies and the producer of new metaphors. Patriarchal discourse limits and transcribes the image and identity of Tehmina but she inverts the social and familial constraints to emerge as a new woman. She strives against all odds to escape all forms of essential categorizing that render the subaltern or minority woman both the victim and unwilling perpetrators of damning stereotypical metaphors both by Eurocentric imperialism and the patriarchal tenets of her Islamic society, the power politics in Pakistani Government and the social ethos of Pakistani marital life. Tehmina is urging her readers and other socio-culturally repressed sisters to rediscover their marginal self and thereby gain emancipation and empowerment.

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