

# Combating the Trajectories of Patriarchy: Reading Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*

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On the first reading of *My Feudal Lord*, one is bound to feel the cathartic process as excess of pity and fear for the victim are aroused. It is an autobiographical novel and a tragic one at that, still the description is vivid, the language is simple and lucid, and the pictorial quality of the narrative brings the episodes alive before one's eyes. The novel delves deep into the physical, psychological and emotional trauma that the victim goes through in her life, at the hands of a feudal mother, a feudal husband and a feudal social setup. Durrani in her narrative unveils the various kinds of violence that women in Pakistan have to bear in order to just survive. The United Nations General Assembly defines violence against women as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (Symonides & Volodin 33)

Tomaseveski (1993) explains this very definition as :

Violence against women includes any act, omission or conduct by means of which physical, sexual or mental suffering is inflicted, directly or indirectly through deceit, seduction, threat harassment. Coercion or any other means on any woman with the purpose or effect of intimidating, punishing or humiliating her or of denying her human dignity, sexual self determination, physical, mental or moral integrity or of undermining the security of her person, her self-respect or her personality or of diminishing her physical or mental capacities. (91)

Tehmina Durrani - the author, sufferer and the spokesperson for thousands of women like her, details the atmosphere of terror and violence in which the well educated women of the elite class survive in a nation like Pakistan where the social fabrication is prominently patriarchal and the fabric itself feudal. The adage that "education liberates" is not quite true for these women. They always need the crutch of husband's or father's name to give them any standing whatsoever in society. They are nothing and no one on their own. Without the aid of a patriarchal name their very existence is impaired and crumbles like dust to dust. Durrani begins the novel by telling how she met Mustafa Khar, how his charms began working on her leading to her separation from her then husband and her eventual marriage with Mustafa Khar. She also inserts in details about how her troubled childhood and mutinous equation with her mother, influenced her and egged her to enter into wedlock with Mr. Khar. The marriage turns out to be a long and excruciating nightmare for her as Khar turns out to be passionately masochistic and a philanderer and adulterer. Durrani stands by him when he is imprisoned and works for his release. When free and out Khar returns to his old methods. The challenge by Mustafa that Tehmina would be just another of his wives, is the nail in the coffin of their marriage. Tehmina, as a woman seeking divorce from her husband, has to forgo any financial alimony and also lose the custody of her kids. But in the end she emerges as a fine specimen of a woman who has travelled the tough path of suppression, but achieved and arrived at the zenith of subjugation.

So far goes the story of the novel, but is it just a fiction or the hard-core reality, is up to the readers to deliberate. The names, situations, places and the chain of events that are included in the narrative can be supported with evidence from the history and the present, thus it cannot be brushed aside as mere fiction, yet the narration, particularly of the events that detail the domestic violence levelled against the author by her husband seems fantastical, and bordering on exaggeration and hyperbole. But it is questionable, as it is her experience, her story, the 'her' side of the story. It may or it may not be true to its very word.

The reader does feel sympathetic towards Tehmina and there is lot of indignation against Mustafa Khar, but there are questions that arise, which remain unanswered. Was the treatment not the result of her own doings? She was cautioned well in time by Sherry, but she never paid any heed. Then as she sowed, she reaped.

Mustafa was abusive towards her since the very starting of their relationship, then why did it take her the period of fourteen long years to cut off and free herself from the clutches of an animalistic husband. Her desertion of her daughter from her first husband has similar overtones to her sacrifice of the four kids she had with Mustafa and all this firstly for her own ambitious wantonness and secondly her liberation respectively. She entered into an illicit relation with Khar, while being married, so why is she so indignant about Khar's incestuousness with her own sister Adila. Her marriage seems to be more of a payback time for her.

Nevertheless, her sheer dint of courage and the enthusiasm she portrays by starting from the ruins of her life is admirable. Instead, of delving into depressing and self-pitying thoughts, she becomes a towering personality for women who go through similar situations but are reluctant to retaliate for fear of the devastating consequences. She proclaims through her memoirs that all does not end with one bad marriage; life is all about moving on and living the way you want. Her autobiography exemplifies what Amjad Rehman Asghar says in his article "A Study to Analyses the Causes of Emotional Abuse against Working Women in Punjab Pakistan":

Women in Pakistan live in a world, which is structured by strict religious, family and tribal customs. They are subjected to discrimination and violence on a daily basis. Pakistan's interpretation of Islam views women as needing protection that ultimately results in their oppression physically, mentally and emotionally. Women in Pakistan are facing various forms of violence, discrimination and inequality in almost every aspect of life. Violence against women in many fields is often not conceived as a violation of human rights but rather as a normal aspect of lives of Pakistani people. They live in an atmosphere of fear, and their lives are guaranteed in exchange for obedience to social norms and traditions. (35)

This novel brings to mind the revolutionising play of Henrick Ibsen, *The Doll's House*. Like Durrani, Nora too slams the door on the face of her husband and walks out of an unequal marriage, that is the climax. These two texts have a lot in common apart from just the ending being similar. Nora has secrets from her husband, so has Tehmina, Nora play acts and pretends to be jovial, in the face of severe adversities so does Tehmina Durrani. Nora reveals her secrets to her friend Mrs Linde and is advised and aided out of her pitiable situation by her efforts and influences, so is Tehmina assisted by her friend Zarmina, the husbands of both the heroines have been delivered a new leash of life at the hands of their wives but neither of the husbands acknowledge or express appropriate gratitude to their respective wives, both the heroines have to leave their children in the wake of their decisions to leave their husbands, they both refuse help from their husbands and last but not the least they both walk out of their abusive marriage in quest for an identity of their own. So much, for the similarities.

Though the thematic lines of *The Doll's House* and *My Feudal Lord* run somewhat parallel to each other, yet the differences between those very lines is still maintained. This novel is certainly not the fictionalised form of the play of Ibsen's. The basic difference arises from the causes of the unequal marriage. Nora has a lover in Dr Rank, but they share a platonic relationship, while Durrani is already married to Anees when she enters into a highly sexual and sensual relationship with Mr Khar. The trauma of Nora is prominently emotional and psychological, while for Durrani it is physical, psychological, emotional and financial. Nora knows her husband and fears he shall leave her when he learns of the debt she has taken as it is goes against his ideals and principles. But for Durrani, throughout her marriage Khar remains a mystery and his temper, mind and love are a labyrinth to her, from which she is never able to emerge. Nora is hurt by the selfishness and hypocrisy in her husband but Tehmina suffers from utter selfishness, absolute hypocrisy, violent jealousy, absorbing possessiveness, excruciating cruelty and shameless flirtatious flaunting of her husband.

The differences and similarities are the ones that exist in the two eras of nineteenth century and the post-modernist times. Nora may or may not return back, but Durrani has already moved on. Nora blames the patriarchal setup for the meaninglessness of her own life, but Durrani turns the table when she defies the 'feudal lord' of her patriarchal domination by challenging, "Well, Mustafa, now the world will soon know you only as Tehmina Durrani's ex-husband". (Durrani)

The time lapse between the centuries in which the aforementioned texts were written is of just two centuries but the geographical separation is of hundreds of miles. Moving closer towards home, in temporal and spatial terms, if Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* are compared a more nuanced and vivid picture of the blueprint of the plot of subjection of women in the two neighbouring nations, emerges. As India and Pakistan are always at loggerheads, the mental, social and economic construct for the position and reputation of women imitates their nation's policy and continues to be similar if not concurrent, in both the nations.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, is her semi if not completely autobiographical debut novel in which Ammu, mother of the twins Estha and Rahel, transgresses the boundaries set by 'Caste' and 'Religion'

and thus is appropriately and suitably punished by the self-appointed guardian of both- the 'Society' itself. In her magnum opus, Roy exposes the sham of Indian society that conceals its armaments of patriarchal dominance under the coverlet of religion and Indian moral value system. To escape from the clutches and unceasing torture of a dominant and abusive father, she enters hastily into a marriage with a man who is of another religion (a Hindu), a drunkard and shallow enough to consent to pandering his wife to his boss, to save his job and gain a promotion. Ammu returns, unwelcomed, to her parent's house with her twins, after obtaining a divorce from her husband. She enters into an intimate physical relationship with Velutha, an untouchable. Velutha is awarded death penalty while Ammu is locked up and then banished from the society, family, and the sight of her children, for daring to infringe the 'sacred' rules of Society. Mammachi and Kochiamma, the mother and aunt of Ammu make sure that their daughter pays for her 'sins'. Durrani's story resonates with somewhat similar reverberations.

Ammu and Tehmina both marry against their families wishes and thus are major defaulters. Ammu is comparatively the worse sinner for she breaks the boundaries of religion, while Durrani steps down the ladder of affluence and grandeur only, in marrying Anees, though later she balances and scores above her parents in these parameters when she marries Mustafa. They are both subjected to physical atrocities and mental agony. They do not receive warm welcome, love and respect when they return to their respective families, after separation from their spouses. The choice of their husbands is influenced by their troubled childhood and this very troubled and abnormal childhood is what they pass on as legacy to their progeny.

The elder female members of their families serve as active propagators and wielders of the rod of patriarchy and its doctrines. Ammu has a brother who uninhibitedly and unabashedly declares to her often, that he is the owner of the privileges that Ammu is enjoying. His illicit relationship and physical exploitation of the women workers of the factory is overlooked, even encouraged by labelling it as 'Men's Needs' and for the fulfilment of them a side entrance is improvised to his room by his own mother. Ammu, being a woman has obviously no needs of importance in a patriarchal system. Durrani has a husband who shamelessly flirts and shares an adulterous intimacy with her younger sister, but she is forced to witness and overlook it, and if it hurts her then endure it all silently, for what other recourse has she to resort to?

Religion, though different, for Ammu is a Christian, while Durrani a Muslim, is another poignant accoutrement at the disposal of the guards and guardians of patriarchy. They use it as the lump of wax which can be moulded, shaped and reshaped in accordance to their wishes and to suit their purpose. Durrani in her narrative mentions several times, how Mustafa interprets the Holy Koran as arguments against her and to win her reconciliation. Ammu on the other hand has to bear and understand the veiled attacks of religious authorities all by herself. She is segregated at church assemblies and even denied a proper Christian burial. She has to be at the mercy of an incinerator to relieve her soul from the calcified bars of her body. But all this does not seem to be new, as it has always been a phallogocentric religion in its origin, orientation, interpretation and execution. The socio-cultural and the religious conditions have always confirmed that the patriarchal dominance and setup is maintained and propagated, unquestioned.

While Roy portrays a tragic end for Ammu in her fiction, Durrani's autobiography is no fiction but a revelation of her own experiences. She emerges as the champion, for the cause of her own empowerment as well as of the large number of women living under the yoke of patriarchy. Durrani does in a patriarchal society which few other women could have accomplished. She campaigns and fights for her husband's release from the prison, bears the exile with him, works out his release and becomes his mouthpiece for the world. If she praises him for all the other humanitarian qualities that he has and the exceptional courage that he exhibits for the cause of other human beings and fellow prisoners, then she rebukes him as well for using men as mere pawns and sacrificing them as and when required to fulfil his selfish means. For all her exceptional and exemplary services to her husband she is awarded with treachery and divorce from her husband and slur from the society. A woman who decides to leave her husband, though he may be abusive and unfaithful, is a major defaulter. As Mahadevi Varma in her essay '*Home And Beyond*' says in relation to women who are willing to utilise their energies with activities outside their homes, that "...how long can we keep this problem under wraps with such ruses? Some day or the other, society will have to understand her dissatisfaction ..." (51)

Durrani never blames religion to be the cause of her miseries, it is the misinterpretation and biased implementation of religious norms she opposes. On the contrary, she feels and mentions how religion and prayers proved to be the one strong pillar for her to lean on. She does commit a sin of being the cause for a pregnant women's banishment from her own house, but she more than repents for it. She also realises her own individuality and vocation and vows to work for those who have been through times similar or even worse than hers. She has been fulfilling the commitments she made to herself till date.

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