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Exploring the Intersection of Beauty, Oppression, and Retaliation in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*

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Abstract: *Discrimination on the basis of skin complexion, domestic violence, and emotional and physical abuse are deeply rooted and affect women in several ways all around the globe. This paper explores various forms of oppression, their impact on the author Tehmina Durrani, and the coping mechanisms used by her for resistance and regaining the sense of self-worth in her autobiographical account My Feudal Lord. It examines Durrani's book My Feudal Lord using qualitative content analysis and feminist theory highlighting the themes of discrimination, objectification, abuse, patriarchy, and retaliation. This research paper investigates how Tehmina Durrani, a well-known Pakistani author, had a neglected and unpleasant childhood due to her skin colour caused by her mother. In addition, recurrent incidences of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband Mustafa Khar resulted in depression, disappointment and suicidal thoughts in Tehmina Durrani. Hence, the book not only portrays how men mistreat women, but also demonstrates how a woman contributes to the misery of another, and in this case, it is a mother who does so to her own daughter. This paper examines Durrani's journey, which highlights the various forms of oppression women experience in rigid patriarchal and feudal societies. Her decision to write an autobiography is an effort to break the silence, resist oppression, establish her own identity, and empower others.*

Keywords: *Abuse, discrimination, objectification, oppression, patriarchy, retaliation*

Introduction

Tehmina Durrani's influential autobiographical account *My Feudal Lord* is an exploration of her multifaceted experiences such as discrimination on the basis of skin colour, domestic violence, and abuse. This paper aims at examining the societal norms of beauty, oppression, and resistance experienced by the author. It explores how social norms of beauty contributed to the well-known Pakistani author Tehmina Durrani's neglected and unpleasant childhood caused by her mother Samina Durrani. It also tells us about how she was the victim of domestic violence, oppression, and abuse after her marriage with a prominent politician Ghulam Mustafa Khar, and her subsequent efforts for resistance. This paper analyses the various forms of oppression experienced by Tehmina Durrani and the various coping mechanisms that she used to resist the same, such as initially silence as a survival strategy to avoid provoking further abuse, thereafter, raising voice against oppression, efforts to seek the support of parents, several attempts to file for legal separation, and ultimately her decision to write the autobiography for breaking the silence and for creating awareness about such issues in the society.

Literature Review

Great deal of research has been done on Tehmina Durrani's book *My Feudal Lord*. Numerous research papers have been published on the book. Zakia Naeem's paper titled "Land, Woman



and Lord: An Ecofeminist Study of Tehmina Durrani's Novels *My Feudal Lord* and *Blasphemy*" in *Kashf Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* is the latest one as it was published this year. Humaira Riaz's paper "Caught in a Feudal Hang-Up: *My Feudal Lord* Mirroring a Villain and the Rebellion of a Pakistani Woman" was published in the book titled "Performativity of Villainy and Evil in Anglophone Literature and Media" in 2021. But there are gaps in research on the selected book with regard to societal standards of beauty, especially discrimination on the basis of skin complexion and also silence as a survival strategy. The researcher will try to address the gaps by examining the social norms of beauty in Pakistan and how they contributed to the author's miserable plight during her childhood especially due to her mother's obsession with those norms. This research will also discuss how the author employed silence as a coping mechanism for a long time to prohibit abuse and finally broke the silence by writing an autobiography.

Research Methodology

This research uses qualitative content analysis focusing on close textual analysis, thematic analysis, contextual analysis, and feminist theory to examine Tehmina Durrani's autobiographical account *My Feudal Lord*.

Objectives of the Research

1. To examine the concept of beauty portrayed in the book *My Feudal Lord* and how it contributes to the author's miserable plight
2. To analyse the various forms of oppression experienced by the author Tehmina Durrani
3. To explore the various coping mechanisms used by the author for resistance, self-empowerment, and social empowerment

Research questions

1. What are the various forms of oppression in Tehmina Durrani's book *My Feudal Lord*?
2. What is the impact of oppression on the author Tehmina Durrani?
3. What are the various coping strategies used by the author for resistance, self-healing, for establishing her identity, and regaining the sense of self-worth?

Discussion:

Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*: An Account of Discrimination, Oppression, Retaliation, and Empowerment

Tehmina Durrani depicts the various types of oppression she endured in her autobiographical account *My Feudal Lord* (1991). She was subjected to colour discrimination caused by her own mother throughout her childhood, which had a significant impact on her self-esteem. It is clearly evident when the author tells readers about her mother, "Almost every word and action indicated her preference for her white-skinned children, (...) Rubina, Zarmina and I – the darker daughters – never seemed able to please her."¹ It is also relevant to state the example of Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* here as it portrays the similar predicament of an African-American girl Pecola Breedlove and describes how she was neglected and hated by her own parents and was an easy target of public humiliation due to her dark skin complexion.² With regard to identity crisis, Durrani says, "Looking back, I realize that we were being raised to be schizophrenic; an appearance of perfection was more important than genuine feelings. There

¹ Durrani, Tehmina, Hoffer, William & Marilyn. *My Feudal Lord*. Corgi Books, RHUK, 1995, pp. 25.

² Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage, 1999.



was no question of discovering oneself. Identity and individuality were crushed.”³ Her unpleasant and oppressive childhood caused by her mother resulted into her impulsive decision to marry Anees Khan at a very early age. This was not a suitable match as per her mother’s expectations. She was expected to marry a prosperous Muslim from a respectable family, bear him many children and lead a sheltered life of leisure.⁴

When the author decided to marry Mustafa Khar, her friend warned her that his love was superficial and also said, “He just loves you because you look good.” (...) You dress well. You’re good for his image. Once he sees you with curlers or with night cream slapped on your face he won’t love you. He likes the package – not the reality.”⁵ Khar’s wife Sherry had also warned her about his violent and abusive nature. But Tehmina Durrani felt that he met all the wrong women previously, therefore he abandoned them; she is his perfect wife who will never be abandoned or abused by him. The author’s parents took her to the psychiatrist for counselling and to get convinced why she should not marry Mustafa Khar as they were against this marriage. But those efforts were also futile as the psychiatrist told them that “Mustafa is a professional seducer. Your daughter is a victim.”⁶ Finally, Tehmina Durrani married Khar in 1976. After marriage, he promised her sincerely as, “Tehmina, you must never fear me. You must talk to me about everything, whenever you want to. I’ll always love you and be kind to you.”⁷

The author exposes various facets of the character of her husband Mustafa Khar, a feudal lord and a prominent politician from Pakistan. She describes him as, “There is a fantasy of a feudal lord as an exotic, tall, dark and handsome man, with flashing eyes and traces of quick-tempered gypsy blood. He is seen as a passionate ladies’ man and something of a rough diamond, the archetypal male chauvinist who forces a woman to love him despite his treatment of her.”⁸ After getting married with Khar, Durrani dreamt of a fairytale life which soon turned into a nightmare. She says, “There was not a day that Mustafa did not hit me for some reason (...) I just tried my best not to provoke him. (...) This was a feudal hang-up: his class believed that a woman was an instrument of a man’s carnal pleasure.”⁹ She recounts, “Women were his obvious victims. He was out to destroy us.”¹⁰ “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.”¹¹

She endured severe physical and emotional abuse all through her marriage to Mustafa Khar, which worsened it and drew attention to the harsh reality of domestic violence. After marrying Mustafa Khar, intense physical abuse and exploitation resulted into depression, disappointment, and suicidal thoughts. Due to Mustafa Khar’s prominent political position, it was extremely difficult for her to seek justice or support. She could not go back to her parents because she had married against their wish and in fact they were against separation or divorce for that matter. She expresses her parents’ opinion on marriage as, “If a husband turned out to be a brute, it was the wife’s duty to persevere until she changed his character. A broken

³ Durrani, Tehmina, Hoffer, William & Marilyn. *My Feudal Lord*. Corgi Books, RHUK, 1995, pp. 29-30.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid, pp. 79-80.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 6.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 80.

⁸ Ibid, Author’s Note, pp.5.

⁹ Durrani, Tehmina, Hoffer, William & Marilyn. *My Feudal Lord*. Corgi Books, RHUK, 1995, pp. 106.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 95.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 100.



marriage was a reflection of a woman's failure."¹² Furthermore, social oppression contributed to her miserable plight. This is evident when society ostracised her when she got legally separated from him. The tragic account of Durrani exposes the numerous forms of oppression that women endure in societies that are rigidly patriarchal.

When it comes to discussing Durrani's resistance or retaliation, it is relevant to quote the author here, "When I decided to write this book, I was aware of the perils of exposing the details of my private life to a male-dominated Muslim society. But I had to cast aside my personal considerations in favour of the greater good."¹³ She wanted to create awareness among women that they need to raise voice against oppression. She gives an important message to the readers through her autobiographical account when she says, "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."¹⁴ Tehmina Durrani's turbulent relationship with Mustafa Khar reached its limit when she started resisting and with unflinching determination, she confronted him and said, "Mustafa, I've taken enough. There's no reason for me to take any more. (...) I'm not your sister or mother. I am your wife. I am not bound to you by ties of blood. We have a contract to live together. I can tear that up whenever I feel like it. Get that into your head. Learn to respect me and appreciate my living with you. (...) You correct your ways and make our lives worth living – or I am leaving."¹⁵ She made strong statements about her self-respect.

However, Khar reacted harshly, dismissively and without regret to her after divorce, "Tehmina, you are nothing any more. Once you were Begum Tehmina Mustafa Khar. Now you are just Tehmina Durrani."¹⁶ This rejection did not weaken the author; on the contrary, it strengthened her conviction. She revealed the reality of her suffering and raised her voice through her book. After writing the autobiography, she said to him, "Well, Mustafa, now the world will soon know you only as Tehmina Durrani's ex-husband."¹⁷ This paper applies feminist theory to examine the intersection of female oppression and resistance within a patriarchal and feudal setting in the book *My Feudal Lord*. If Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* is applied to *My Feudal Lord*, it becomes evident how Tehmina Durrani's book subverts patriarchal discourse in both form and content. Simone de Beauvoir's proclamation "One is not born, but becomes, a woman" and her expression regarding a woman as the "Other" are highly relevant while examining Durrani's predicament in patriarchal society. The concept of 'subaltern' from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is also relevant here. Though Tehmina Durrani is from an affluent family, she is silenced in a patriarchal and feudal society. It is said that subalterns cannot speak, as they are always silenced. Durrani did not raise her voice for a long time, but finally, after suffering for several years, she raises her voice against oppression.

Kate Millett has discussed the notion of 'sexual politics' comprehensively in her book "Sexual Politics" (1970). This notion helps us to understand personal as political in Durrani's book *My Feudal Lord*. Durrani's marriage to Ghulam Mustafa Khar serves as an example of how political power contributes to gender oppression, as she endures intense emotional and physical

¹² Ibid, pp. 29.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 375.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 188-189.

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 373-374.

¹⁷ Durrani, Tehmina, Hoffer, William & Marilyn. *My Feudal Lord*. Corgi Books, RHUK, 1995, pp. 382.



abuse. Her husband Mustafa Khar's abusive and violent behaviour is not simply personal anguish for her, but it is an example of systemic oppression against women. A critical examination of Durrani's book from the point of view of feminist theory reveals how patriarchy was deeply ingrained in Pakistani society at that time. Through in-depth textual analysis, the methodology reveals how Durrani raises her voice against objectification of women and also against their subjugation while regaining her sense of self-worth and creating her unique identity. Durrani's book is a harsh critique of patriarchy, domestic violence, colourism, and feudal power, which makes it more than just an autobiography. Her autobiographical writing is a form of retaliation reflecting Simone de Beauvoir's belief that women can achieve existential freedom by defining themselves and rejecting repressive social norms.

Findings

Based on methodology, objectives and the analysis of the book *My Feudal Lord*, significant findings can be stated as below:

An important but often neglected aspect in the book is discrimination based on skin tone, also known as colourism which was the early experience of oppression for Tehmina Durrani. Fair skin complexion as the notion of beauty is ingrained in the author's mother, therefore, she favoured her fair-complexioned children more than the darker ones causing Tehmina Durrani to suffer throughout her childhood due to discrimination.

Lack of parental love is another important aspect in the book which has not been highlighted much. The absence of mother's care, concern, and love resulted into the loss of self-esteem in Tehmina Durrani and was also responsible for why she tolerated abuse in the later part of her life. Her father loved her but could not shower love upon her due to his wife's dominating nature.

Her mother had internalised social norms of beauty so much that she neglected her own daughter Tehmina who had dark skin complexion. Thus, the book not only depicts the oppression of women by men, but it also shows how a woman exploits another woman, and in fact, here it is a mother who inflicts it upon her own daughter. Hence, we may say that her unpleasant childhood forms the basis for her future subjugation to Mustafa Khar. It is noteworthy to see that in order to put a full stop to her suffering, raise voice against oppression, and to establish her identity, the author wrote an autobiography.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that Tehmina Durrani skilfully explores the subtle relationship between beauty, oppression, and resistance within a patriarchal and feudal setting in her autobiographical account *My Feudal Lord*. She achieves the sense of self-worth and transforms her identity beyond predefined roles by uncovering the abusive circumstances surrounding her marriage to Mustafa Khar. The study uses Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* as an essential framework to show how Durrani's identity is formed by the patriarchal system that labels women as the "Other" and forces them into subservience. Tehmina Durrani's journey from oppression to regaining the sense of self-worth, discovering her identity, and ultimately empowerment proved to be an inspirational example for the generations to come. She voiced a sense of hope that comes from enduring hardship and surviving when she says, "May my sons never oppress the weak; may my daughters learn to fight oppression."¹⁸

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