

Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*: An Advocate of Feminist Defiance

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Abstract

The novel My Feudal Lord explores the story of Tehmina Durrani, raised in one of the most influential families of Lahore. But her marriage to one of Pakistan's most eminent political figures, soon turned into a nightmarish experience for her. Her violent and over-possessive husband forced her to endure in silence for fourteen long years till she broke silence through her autobiographical work 'My feudal Lord'. Her story provides extraordinary insight into the deplorable position of Muslim women caught in the vicious circle of Muslim society. The paper explores how she overcame her fear and exemplifies her journey from fear to fearlessness. Her decision to rebel against her husband made her to pay a high price for it. Being a Muslim woman and seeking divorce made her alienated from her family and friends. She kept herself composed even when she lost the custody of her four children and all the financial support from her husband. The novel succeeds in revealing the dark side of a woman's life in Muslim society.

Keywords: Eminent, fearlessness, nightmarish experience, over –possessive, Feminist Defiance .

Tehmina Durrani, a renowned Pakistani authoress, well known for her autobiographical work *My Feudal Lord* reveals her story of sin and retribution and how she attained the blissful harmony between her inner and outer self. The division of the novel as, 'Lion of the Punjab', 'Law of the Jungle' and 'The Lioness' are significantly symbolic too. The first part 'The Lion of Punjab' projects Mustafa Khar as the lion of Punjab, a powerful invincible character. The second part entitled 'Law of the Jungle' reveals his feudal upbringing, his awful nature, his brutality with women strictly adhering to the feudal system in Pakistani society. The third part 'The Lioness' glorifies the women power and the journey of Tehmina Durrani from fear to fearlessness.

The story revolves around Tehmina Durrani, a child of a reputed Punjabi family, her mother Samina actively involved in politics and her father 'Nawab Sir Hayat', renowned as the prime-minister of Patiala state. Durrani faced a complicated childhood life because of her dark-complexion which led her to face an inferior status in the house as her mother did not like her. From her early childhood she was condemned and neglected as a dark child and was made to feel inferior at every step of life. As said by her:

Only over time would I come to understand what a shock I was to my mother. She was a light – skinned beauty –and proud of it: her family was a fair – skinned and considered itself to be superior by that fact. A dark child was condemned to neglect. And yet there I was, arriving in the world in 1953 with a dark skin. It seemed evident by my mother's attitude that she regarded me as ugly and was embarrassed to present me to friends and relatives. Even as a baby I felt my inadequacy. My surroundings seemed hostile to the way I looked, and very early I withdrew into an isolated, condemned by –nature cell. I never remember my mother hugging or kissing me when I was little" (Durrani 23).

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Durrani's family was recognised as one of the model family of the state and her mother was too strict to offer any liberty to any one of child of the family, as the author says, "We were a model family, the sort of offspring who are pointed out as examples of decorum to other, naughtier children. We were lavished with comforts and privileges and travelled the world" (Durrani 23). Durrani never dared to show her resentment to her authoritarian and commanding mother. Moreover she was an inferior being in the eyes of her mother, so had no say for anything which also crushed her self-respect. She always posed as an obedient daughter to protect herself from the rage of her mother. They hardly communicated with each other as her mother never spoke to her but only gave commands and Durrani religiously followed all of them to the best of her capacity. This was her life and she became perfectly used to it. She admits:

My mother demanded total obedience and although I always complied, she discerned early signs of rebellion in both my expression and my body language. I obeyed, but my crime was I did not look obedient. I was sullen, and she resented my resentment. We never spoke openly about this, however. Her disapproval was communicated through pursed lips and a deep icy stare that crumbled me –or – anyone –into instant submission. When my mother spoke it was a command, we were to carry out orders in silence (Durrani 24 -25).

As Durrani's life revolved around her mother's command and thus her chores involved taking due care of her mother's bedroom, and to make sure that her lavish wardrobe was always in order. Her mother was very passionate about her dressing and looks. Despite following the modern lifestyle, she disdained the western manner of dressing and demanded that entire family should conform to eastern fashion. Each day before school, Durrani laid out the appropriate outfit for her mother's morning, complete with the correct shoes and accessories. She knew her mother's choice for cotton saris or delicate chiffon combined with exclusive jewellery which she arranged exactly according to her mother's taste. She often faced childhood anxiety for being perfect in the eyes of her mom as:

After school, we repeated the ritual for her dinner outfit. Mother never retrieved anything from cupboards or dressers. She simply put out her hand, and I was to have the necessary items ready, leaving her concentration free to attend to braiding her long hair, rimming her eyes with kohl and brushing her cheeks with colour. I stood in silence behind her. When she finally left her bedroom for the evening, I would sigh with relief and lay out her nightclothes on the bed, place her slippers exactly where she expected them to be, and tidy up the bath and dressing rooms. The servant would turn the sheets over and switch on the bedside lamps, place the water jug and glasses, and draw up the curtains (Durrani 27).

According to the rules of the family, she was also instructed by her mother, not to meet any man apart from her father, brother and a few close relatives. The role prescribed for her was to marry and to fit well in the Pakistani society, "My role in life was to marry and to marry well. Mother had an ideal man in mind for each one of us. Our husbands were the only males to whom we would ever be exposed" (Durrani 28). There was a long list of dos and don'ts for the girls of the house as Durrani tells:

My childhood was encumbered by a lengthy list of don'ts, all designed to maintain an inviolate distance between myself and the masculine world: never wear makeup or nail polish. Do not look at boys. Avoid modern girlfriends and avoid any girl who has an older brother. Never visit a friend without special permission and without your nanny. Never pick up the telephone. Never go out alone with the driver. Never stand around in the kitchen with the male servants" (Durrani 28).

Through this novel, Durrani presents the male dominating society and how she too was also conditioned to be subservient after marriage to her husband. As it was prevalent in those times

in the society that an ideal wife is always the one who follows her husband's will .If the husband ill treats or behaves brutally it is the sole responsibility of wife to bear it all and show perseverance .Durrani exclaims in her own words that, "We were taught that marriage was a sacred and irrevocable institution. If a husband turned out to be a brute, it was the wife's duty to persevere until she changed his character. A broken marriage was a reflection of a women's failure" (Durrani 29).The authoress herself was the type of girl who was groomed well by her mother to be a submissive daughter ,a submissive wife and never to give way to her free will .As Krishna Swamy too comments in Contemporary Literary Theory :A Student's Companion , " In all traditions women have always been considered infusion and incapable of any serious thinking; irrespective of religion, country, race, the period in which they live, more or less the same perception and sex- stereotyping is seen in language and literature."(Krishna Swamy 74)

As the novel progresses, Durrani, a normal looking girl turned out to be a beautiful maid and her beauty began to attract everyone .Taking due care of her mothers' wardrobe and arranging and deciding her outfit for all occasions, she turned out to be an expert in dressing business .Her upbringing got reflected in her own way of dressing and presenting herself in parties and festive occasions just like her mother. She was being noticed by all and sundry as a charming, self possessed girl with refined manners and etiquettes .Her appearance and her self-conscious nature is also revealed through this statement in My feudal Lord when she describes her looks as, "my pale –green chiffon sari rustled softly as I moved, and my braided plait of auburn hair fell all the way to my knees .Around my neck a row of diamonds matched my earrings. As I checked my appearance in a full – length mirror my face flushed with self –conscious pleasure" (Durrani 17).

In no time, this gorgeous looking girl was tied into matrimonial life to Anees and she was content with her first gained freedom from her mother .But the happiness for her was transitory as after some time she felt bored with this marriage. She began to realise that Anees was inferior to her as she opined, "Two and a half years passed .My marriage to Anees reached a plateau. I knew that something was amiss but did not have a clue as to what it was although I was now showered with compliments and loved dearly by my in –laws, my mind remained troubled by a childhood with which I did not know how to come to terms" (Durrani 37).

She wanted to have some happiness and thrill in her life with an intention to attain some position in society. In the meantime, her meeting with Mustafa in a party came as a bolt from blue in her life .She fell in love with Mustafa after a few meetings with him. She was too enticed by Mustafa's polite mannerism, his outfit and the way he was an allocation to the group of women around him .In the very beginning she herself admits:

my gaze settled upon a tall ,dark ,handsome man in black suit .His starched white shirt was set off by a burgundy tie and a matching handkerchief .My mind classified him as a rake ,a bit devilish in an appealing sort of way .He had attracted a group of women around him ,who seemed to hang on his every word .But the buzz of gentle conversation ,the tinkle of ice cubes and well –manicured laughter made it impossible for me to hear (Durrani 19).

Mustafa was also attracted and felt the same. Durrani became more and more desperate to know this man as she expresses, "I was drawn like a moth to a flame" (Durrani 21).It was the first time that she felt true love and thrill for someone and obviously Mustafa too reciprocated her love .Mustafa was a famous politician and belonged to the elite class and somewhere in her heart Durrani was unsatisfied with the mediocre status of her husband Anees .She desired

a husband for herself just like Mustafa .She liked the elite mannerism and high status of Mustafa .He too was mesmerised by the beauty and elegance of Tehmina .They were a perfect match for each other and love flourished between them which culminated into marriage.

Her marriage with Mustafa and her break up with Anees brought a great change in her life. Finally, she became the sixth wife of Mustafa .It was Sherry, Mustafa's fifth wife who had earlier warned Tehmina against the brutality of her husband. But Tehmina never paid any heed to it and thus faced consequences of it. Durrani's firm faith that she was different and knows well how to handle overpowering men like Mustafa and that Sherry was not a perfect match for him shattered in no time after her marriage to Mustafa. Meanwhile t at one place in the novel she asserts that t she loved overpowering and commanding husbands and not meek and timid men like Anees and her own father and thus Mustafa was a perfect match for her. She has always witnessed that men around her were submissive and not commanding be it her own father or husband and she resented this feeling in her heart .In contrast to this Mustafa was an authoritarian personality who roared like a lion and she liked and praised this trait of him. As she herself admits, "That Mustafa was authoritarian, conservative and overpowering I knew from the start –but that was precisely what attracted me so much .Psychologically I had suffered from my father's weak role in our family. Now here was someone who presented a quite different personality" (Durrani 39).

But she never knew that her happiness was short lived .After some time of her marriage she came to know how he ill- treated his other wives and now she was also one of them .She began to be in the grip of extreme fear and hopeless situation. Mustafa had ruined Safia's life, then he married Naubahar and ruined her life and married Sherry and now it's her turn to be his victim for her whole life. Durrani expresses how he had treated Safia, her wife and locked her as said:

Mustafa immediately reverted to the dictates of his feudal heritage. 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 .At the time, there was no electricity or plumbing in Kot Addu .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 (Durrani 45).

Durrani witnessed Mustafa beating Sherry in her presence and froze in shock at the brutality of her husband with women. For some time she could not believe that how a man could beat a women so mercilessly and did not even repent of his actions. She gradually learnt to be an obedient wife but realised that it was of no use .Mustafa did not need a reason to beat his wives .It was a part of his daily routine to thrash women on pity issues. Durrani mentions one night when he almost thrashed her to death for some pity reason. With the passing time, it became a part of her life to bear his beatings in silence. But these subsequent instances of her beatings became so brutal and horrifying and Mustafa hurt her so much that she even vomited blood as stated by her:

I leaned heavily against the sink top and struggled to catch my breath. Slowly I raised my eyes to the mirror .I gasped in fresh fright at the monster who gazed back at me. shiver ran through me .My teeth chattered .My body shook .My braid had opened and my long hair was wild and strewn, like a witch's .The right side of my nose had disappeared, merging into a swollen cheek .My lips protruded in an exaggerated and grotesque pout .My eyes were deeply sunk into huge, purple patches: One of them hurt badly and was bloodshot. A piercing pain screamed in one ear .The left side of my scalp was matted

with blood .I pulled at it and tufts of hair came out in my hands .I rinsed my mouth and tasted blood” (Durrani 103).

Mustafa’s torture increased day by day and Durrani realised what Sherry has faced and why she warned her of not marrying Mustafa .He never needed a reason to beat Tehmina but instead it was his nature to create nuisance that Durrani had to silently bear his brutal behaviour which ended with Durrani’s face and body smashed up completely .She has realised that she has now taken the place of Sherry and could empathise with her .The worse part of this all was that she has completely lost herself and hardly dared to oppose and raise voice against her husband .She knew well that Mustafa can’t stand any opposition and in that case he would nearly beat her to death .She began to live in constant fear and trauma and has not an iota of self respect left in her. She intimated as follows:

There was not a day that Mustafa did not hit me for some reason ;the food was late ,his clothes were not creased .With a shudder ,I realized that I had become just like the now – discarded a Sherry .Perhaps the greatest tragedy was that ,like her ,I stopped questioning his violent outbursts .I just tried my best not to provoke him .If I dared to object in some meagre way ,the beating was only worse .At last I understood Sherry’s dilemma – by the minute I became like her (Durrani 106).

Durrani explores through her own story that there is nothing unusual that in our society women, the inferior being, are being battered by men, in most cases their own husband and they suffer silently. Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate in his book *The Argumentative Indian* correlates here about the physical violence against women as, “One of the most brutal features of gender inequality takes the form of physical violence against women. The incident of such violence is remarkably high, not only in poorer and less developed economics, but also in wealthy and modern societies. Indeed, the frequency of battering of women even in the richest and the most developed economics is astonishing high. Some studies have suggested that there are as many as 1.5 million cases per year of rape and physical assault on women in the United states alone”(Amartya Sen 236-37).

Durrani pictures the pitiable condition of women in male dominated society as she herself became the victim of the same and suffered in silence .But this was not the end of Mustafa’s torture and a new episode of his infidelity came into being in the second part of the novel entitled ‘Lion of the Jungle’. Durrani gets a revelation that Mustafa had an affair with her sister Adila. Tehmina tries to protest but the way Durrani was handled by Mustafa was shocking and crushed the soul of Durrani. She was humiliated to the core on her rebellion against Mustafa’s affair with her sister. His double character showed up as a horrible incident in the life of Durrani when she was thrashed and was made to endure his beatings on her naked body:

Mustafa’s eye fell upon his double –barrelled shotgun ,which stood against the wall next to the TV set .In one swift movement he reached out with his right hand, grabbed the barrel and swung it at me .The wooden butt of the gun slammed into my side. I fell, but instinctively scrambled to my feet. I screamed “you have destroyed my life” (Durrani 163).

“I began shouting for Bilal’s help .Mustafa only stopped when he saw evidence of obvious damage .Some of his blows was errant. My mouth showed blood. Take off your clothes; he shouted .every stitch .Takethem ...off.”I slipped out of my trousers .Clad only in a bra and panties, I stared at him, pleading, begging, crying for him to allow me stop .But there was no reprieve. I felt blood drying on my swollen lips and nose .With trembling fingers; I pulled off

my underclothes (Durrani 164)...He sat in the chair with his arms extended on either side, like a king on his throne .His eyes ran up and down my naked body, invading” (Durrani 165).

Durrani was completely devastated after this horrifying incident and realised that Mustafa could go to any extent of torture with his wives as he considered them as his slaves who had to follow his orders without questioning his authority .Durrani’s mental state became worse and she became totally detached from Mustafa and prayed to Almighty to give her strength . She also drew her strength from her children. She began to analyse her life. She had stopped reacting like a normal human being to all the insult and humiliation that Mustafa showed on her. She understood that her husband had crushed her spirit. He had even isolated her from her family and friends. She has now to find her way out and admits, “I knew that my own personality had to change. I had become submissive and weak – just like his previous wives. I had somehow to learn to deal with him on a different level .God answered my desperate plea. The dust of inertia was blown away” (Durrani 188).

Durrani had completely made up her mind that she has to be courageous and handle this situation alone. After knowing her worsened condition even her own mother refused to help her as she stated that it was her own decision to marry Mustafa and now she has to face the consequences of it in utter silence and remarked that this is the rule of our society not to raise voice against husband. But Durrani could not follow this advice of her mother. Durrani with her four children decided to revolt against her Feudal Lord, Mustafa Khar and teach him a lesson. When as usual, one day Mustafa in anger rose to beat her up again, she roared up like a lioness to protect herself and acted as, “I grabbed the pot from the stove and threw it at him. He screamed in pain from the burning brew .For a moment he was paralyzed. Then, as he raised his hand to strike back, I pushed him in the chest and yelled, ‘the next time you raise your hand to me I will pick up a knife and kill you’” (Durrani 188).She was no more the same submissive Tehmina who was taught from her early childhood that it is the divine duty of a good woman to bear all the brutalities of her husband .She instead decided to teach his man a lesson .Thus ,came an end to the tortures of Mustafa and Durrani finally broke off with him forever to regain her lost identity . Mustafa was confused and even frightened by the resistance of Durrani. A new Tehmina Durrani emerged out of the ashes of torture and violence that is older and sadder but also wiser. Tehmina Durrani broke silence and gave a message that women must live to raise their voice against injustice. Begum Tehmina Mustafa Khar divorced her husband and regains her own identity of just Tehmina Durrani.

To conclude, Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* is a compelling account of feminist resistance against patriarchal oppression. Through her deeply personal narrative, Durrani lays bare the misogyny deeply rooted in the feudal system .It offers a rare glimpse into a woman’s battle to reclaim her identity and freedom. Her bravery in exposing the harsh realities of her life and confronting a powerful patriarchal figure symbolizes a wider struggle for woman’s right in oppressive environment. While presenting her personal agony and grief her story serves as a call for collective reflection on societal norms. It brings attentions to the silent suffering endured by countless woman and challenges the widespread acceptance of gender inequality .By revealing her experience, Durrani inspires woman to stand up against oppression and demand equality and respect. Her defiance becomes a source of hope for those facing similar struggles, proving that resistance is possible even against the entrenched system of power. *My Feudal Lord* thus remains a significant work of feminist literature, advocating for self respect, dignity and the strength to resist injustice. Tehmina Durrani’s journey

represents not just her own voice but also that of many others, urging change and challenging the core structure of patriarchal dominance.

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