

Unveiling the Identities: Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*

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Abstract

Tehmina Durrani's writings provide innumerable instances of traditionally orchestrated institutional discourses and practices that maintain the oppression and regulation of a wife's body irrespective of age, education, location, class and caste. By identifying similarity between various forms of oppression and locating patterns of domination, Durrani assertively challenges the patriarchal discourses and denounces the hierarchical authoritarian mindset therein. This paper studies how the writer problematises the ideological discourses produced not only by the patriarchal institution of marriage but also by the family, the state, religion and the law, in order to explore the embodied experiences and preconceptions of wives and other roles and responsibilities of women in her novel *Blasphemy*.

Keywords: Blasphemy, Female Sexuality, Patriarchal Discourses, Problematisation, Transnationalization

1. Introduction

Islamic feminism is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam. It aims at the total equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender, in public and private life. Islamic feminists advocate women's rights, gender equality and social justice grounded in an Islamic framework. Women in Pakistan like their counterparts elsewhere in the world have been victims of the double oppression of class and gender. Given a socio-economic milieu in which the vast majority of the populace are victims of social, political and economic deprivation, women have had to struggle to win concessions from society and have had a difficult time maintaining themselves and their families. Muslim feminist writing is an impressive repertoire that has evolved from a low key implication of male injustice to open confrontation.

The world of Muslim women has been marked by repression and degradation and women alone can raise their voices to free themselves of the shackles of male control and exploitation. *Pardah* also assumes that the woman remains the private property of man and she cannot be visible because here visibility endangers her ownership by the

man. The feminist writers explicitly link religious doctrines or rather male interpretation of religious doctrines with women's oppression in Pakistani post-colonial society.

2. Problematising the Dominant Discourse

The socio-political and cultural situations also had posed a formidable question of a woman's identity. Durrani identifies herself as a Pakistani writer; she has earned admiration as a strong woman of purpose and determination. She problematises the ideological discourses produced not only by the patriarchal institution of marriage but also by the family, the state, religion and the law, in order to explore the embodied experiences and preconceptions of wives and other roles and responsibilities of women. Her aim is to identify the wife's body as the locus of masculine power in different social, economic and historical settings. Her work provides innumerable instances of traditionally orchestrated institutional discourses and practices that maintain the oppression and regulation of a wife's body irrespective of age, education, location, class and caste. By

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identifying similarity between various forms of oppression and locating patterns of domination, Durrani assertively challenges the patriarchal discourses and denounces the hierarchical authoritarian mindset therein. The act of writing for a woman is, an opportunity to break her silence of ages because the patriarchal set up has repressed her and the racial society has taught her to be culturally silent.

3. Unveiling the Identities

Set in South Pakistan, *Blasphemy* is an enticing novel by Tehmina Durrani. Angry and courageous in outlook, it establishes Durrani among the foremost writers of the subcontinent. *Blasphemy* depicts the struggle of a Muslim woman against all that is contrary to what Islam stands for. It is an amalgamation of fact and fiction a blending to disguise and protect the victims of a horrible human tragedy, while exposing the powerful religious imposters who prey on wretched and powerless people. A shocking tale of cruelty, sex and violence, *Blasphemy* embodies a horrific account of how the custodians of religion are using their special knowledge to exploit the illiterate masses.

Durrani's *Blasphemy* revolves round the central character Heer - a very beautiful woman married to a religious leader - Pir Sain, when she is barely fifteen, much against her desire: Marriage is a critical turning point for a girl, allowing her to translate into reality the latent reproductive capacities and thereby realize her claim to womanhood in the eyes of community. The pressing obligation on the part of parents to marry off a girl underlines the high cultural value attached to wifhood. The custom of child marriage that gained popularity in the subcontinent during the bygone era of feudalism has successfully made its way into the present age of capitalism and transnationalization. Although most of the socio-political conditions that were prevalent then are dying out fast, nevertheless, people still are not absolutely free of this social evil which is a gross violation of fundamental human rights. Durrani condemns parental complicities and governmental laxity with regards to matrimonial alliances that expose millions of adolescent girls as well as some boys to lives of dire misery. Child marriage is largely a mechanism to control the female sexuality and force her to conform to hierarchical masculine norms. Durrani provides ample guidelines for exposing the ills of the sub continental social construction that convert a girl child's body into ready site of oppression through child marriage.

Durrani's fiction similarly depicts Pakistani parents who do not have much faith in the educational system as helping their daughters in any way. For these parents as

well, marriage is the cure all for their adolescent daughters. Hence when school going Heer shows her preference for further education, rather than marriage, her mother retorts furiously and declares her own decision regarding a proposal for her daughter:

How can you be so selfish child? You must carry your share of responsibility towards your sister and brother. You are fifteen years old; you can't sit at home forever. As young girls must not remain unattached I am going to say: Yes. Besides, I don't have the money to educate you.^[1] (24)

Thus, she puts an end to all further arguments about her education and seals her daughter's fate with the stamp of marriage. In *Blasphemy*, Tehmina is portraying the suffocation of such child brides and shattering of their dreams at the hands of their own parents. Heer gambles away her life because she is too scared of being a burden to her widowed mother, however, her mother has no qualms about her family living off the dividends of Heer's imprisonment in the name of marriage. In other words, girls are to be married away because of the social emphasis on chastity of girls in culture. Heer comments on her mother's diligence in imparting the values of obedience and subservience in her, stating:

Ma lectured me at every opportunity - uphold your father's honor by showing your good breeding. Always remain subservient to your husband's will. Never put yourself in a position where you need to give explanations or make complaints.^[1] (26)

Like many Pakistani mothers, Heer's mother believes that a daughter's virtue ensures a father's own religious and social security in this life and that why elderly female in the family devise religious practices of disciplining their girl children's bodies in different ways in the hope of marrying them respectfully. For twenty five years Heer suffers physical abuse, rape and harsh labor under Pir's autocracy, a whip wielded upon all the women of his household relatives and servants alike. Pir is the physical embodiment of patriarchal authority and the narrative finds him literally branding the father's name on the women - he governs in the house. Heer enters the household of absolute Purdah, the abode of her husband where a feeling of claustrophobia haunts her. She ventures to record:

Stripped naked, I felt a mountain of flesh descend on me.... With only the sheer will to be, I remained alive, barely. He had commenced our wedding night with an animal haste for food and ended it satiated. The shrill ring of the early morning alarm shrieked, and I jumped up like a frightened bird. Did I sleep that night or was it some kind of death?^[1] (39)

Because of the utter insensitivity and haste on her husband's part, Heer's marital dreams are smashed on her

wedding night. Her marriage seems to be an evil contract that has assigned her to a cruel god on earth. In sheer perplexity she utters these words:

The preparation, the ritual, the ceremony and the slaughter. Its terms were specified by our faith, sealed with social and familial norms Was this repeated in every corner of the world over and over again?^[1] (BL 39)

For her, the bed becomes a 'wide grave' and the items in her bedroom – all symbols of slaughter house. Through the ritual of Heer's chastity test on the first morning of her married life, Durrani exposes a marital practice in certain parts of Pakistan that puts a child bride through a humiliating and frightful bodily experience right after the marriage. Pir beats Heer with cold calculation of a sadist the first time the day after their wedding. She violates the first in series of cardinal rules by greeting her mother and some servants without her veil or burkha. The beating is public and precisely executed. Heer is imprisoned for days. The day Heer enters Pir's prison, the days and nights of fortune, the long days it takes to heal from elongated stretches of physical abuse and rape, the months and years that pass in delivering children and then their problematic passage into an adulthood dictated by their perverted father – time becomes another tool of patriarchal torture. The more Heer comes to understand her new status, the more she learns the feminine art of swallowing her pain. Heer's acts of remembrance and Durrani's in recording this in writing then becomes an exercise of self-preservation, a way to battle against the disappearing self and save the trace on the skipping stage of paper. Heer, name sake for an actual woman, Durrani saves traces of appearance and provides the literary space upon which to perform the speech of a woman who managed to live under patriarchal tyranny. In a way then, the telling of this tale is the first step in the emergence of a feminine voice, the woman's speech act which is relegated as a '*Blasphemy*'. Heer can feel the presence of an eagle like woman always: watching everyone as if everyone was committing some crime.

Heer narrates the arid atmosphere that surrounds the family, and the anguish her own body suffers at the arrival of her first girl child:

When my first daughter was born, petrified of Pir Sain's displeasure at the birth of a girl, I stuffed my mouth with a cloth to control a cry of anxiety. He did not even glance at the bundle. She would always be a bundle to him. Ordered into purdah at birth, my daughter would remain in that prison till her death.^[1] (78)

What Heer understands as her anathema of producing a girl-child, is shared by many Sub-Continental wives, but if the wives are not adults themselves, then they are totally

unable to protest against social practices that demean their daughters.

Heer's barren solitariness is broken by her first partner in the community of women that makes and unmakes itself several times over the time period of this novel, Kaali or black. Unlike the other servants who are loyal to Pir's mother, Amma Sain, Kaali is Heer's confidant, nimble, laughing and full of light. Out of the blue, the woman who raised Pir, Dai, and a point of valuable information alights upon her and consoles her with stories about the making of Pir. The same Dai also tells stories with more subversive hints such as Tara who comes and confronts one of the Pir's ancestors with the child of their union by flinging a bloody fetus at her lover in public. Dai, for all her tutelage as the guardian of the Pir and now of his wife comes cloaked with the intent to awaken Heer into resistance. It is the rays of hope provided by the combined company of Kaali and Dai that Heer is able to see the old woman. Finally, Heer's own daughter her eldest child, Guppi, proves to be a friend, philosopher and pragmatist. She honors and respects Heer, a sentiment scant in Heer's life, and thinks of her as an angel from heaven. Along with that, Guppi also comes to understand that Heer has suffered greatly and maintained a stoic silence, for the sake of her children. The incidents like physical relationship between the father and the daughter, the daughter's mute 'helplessness', and, Heer's son to marry the same girl who happens to be a victim of his father's atrocities speak out the repression of women and their agony. One can just empathize with the psychodynamics of such women. In this content excess affect, even maternal love, yields perversity. The secrecy imposed upon the woman's physical identity is yet another aspect of patriarchal regulation of women's bodies, which serves to systematically confine the women at his will. Ontological questions on selfhood arise at this juncture: Heer asks herself "Who am I?" When she stares into the mirror, she realizes that she is finished, without receiving anything in return for the unfair deal of matrimony with a monster. When she contemplates the sterility of her life, she wonders who was I? She thinks – he never thought of me as a human being; she forgets about being thought of as a woman.

4. Conclusion

Being a bold woman, she traverses the hard path with perseverance and moves towards a triumphant liberation. Her body is suppressed but strength of mind and willpower conquers the natural biological inferiority of a woman. She experiences the torture and trauma for years at the hands of her husband and after his death at the hands of her

own son who imitated his father in every way. It is really a prototypical of women's social status without its identity. Rajaji's reaction depicts not only blind support of a son for his father, but also his gender role expectations from his mother. A typical product of his patriarchal society, he expects selfless sacrifice from his mother at any cost upon the insistence of his uncles, and in order to save his hereditary title as apir, Rajaji walks up to his mother as she lies half dead on a stretcher, and pulls the sheet away from her face. Their eyes stare at each other, and though his fill with tears as he bids her farewell, like a god he pronounces her dead. Heer's brother and sisters carry away her emaciated body to a place far away from Pir Sain's jurisdiction.

Only by embracing self-banishment and burying her old identity as a Pir's wife and mother, is she allowed to live a fresh life. The novel ends with the note that women are always marginalized due to gender, cultural institutions and patriarchal conspiracies. Thus, *Blasphemy* is a testimony to a woman's power of endurance. Heer suffers long years of injustice, but sustains her faith in the justice and God. It is with this faith that she succeeds in bringing about her husband's death. Though the best years of

her life are ruined with her cursed marriage, her ultimate deliverance holds out at least the promise of hope. Thus *Blasphemy* is a powerful delineation of the way women can be suppressed and dehumanized, and presents an authentic fictional documentation of women's ruthless suppression and humiliation in a society brutally controlled by feudal lords and patriarchal system.

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