



Masculine Hegemony and Gender Politics in Tehmina Durrani's Autobiography: My Feudal Lord

Mohinder

Assistant Prof.

IKPTU

The paper aims to study the masculine hegemony and gender politics in the autobiography of Tehmina Durrani, *My Feudal Lord* (1995). The paper is an attempt to unfold the social practices of patriarchal society and socio-cultural context in which Tehmina penned her autobiography. It also highlights the socially restricted circumstances under which women live, where they suffer from disappointment, frustration, discouragement and taunting. *My Feudal Lord* is divided into three parts; Lion of the Punjab, Law of the jungle and Lioness, in which Tehmina gives full detail of her second marriage with the Pakistan's most eminent political personality Ghulam Mustafa Khar, a right hand man to Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the ex-Prime Minister of Pakistan. It records her married life with Mr.Khar from their marriage to divorce. It unfolds the dilemma of Tehmina, she had to face after becoming the part of the feudal family of Mustafa Khar. Her autobiography has stirred many debates in the male dominating society of Pakistan owing to the bold account of her crippled married life.

Her autobiography is an insight into the vulnerable position of women due to hegemonic gender paradigms and chauvinism existing in Pakistan. The term cultural hegemony was coined by Italian Marxist leader, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) for understanding the power relations among the social classes in a society. According to Gramsci, authority is both coercive and dependent on the consent of the larger masses over which it is exercised. This consent is obtained through apparently innocuous everyday life practices. Fundamentally, as Gramsci explains in *The Prison Notebooks* (1971), hegemony is the power of certain classes to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all. In this construction, "[d]omination is thus exerted not by force, nor even necessarily by active persuasion, but by a more subtle and inclusive power" (Ashcroft 106-107). Therefore, hegemony presupposes acquiescence on the part of the subalterns in their servitude. In short, hegemony is rule by consent.

The concept of hegemony helps to understand how patriarchal society can coerce and perpetuate male domination and women are persuaded to accept the same and thus consent to maintain the status quo. Norman Fairclough, one of the founders of critical discourse analysis borrowed Gramsci's concept of Hegemony which is not simply about dominating a group but rather about integrating domination through their consent to the moral, political and cultural values of the dominant group. According to Fairclough:

Ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination and exploitation. They may be enacted in ways of interaction (and therefore in genres) and inculcated in ways of being identities (and therefore styles). Analysis of texts ... is an important aspect of ideological analysis and critique. (218)

Fairclough conceives ideologies as construction of practices from particular perspectives in the form of communication and interactive genres. And in furthering these practices, literary texts become signifiers simultaneously indicating shift in social patterns, subjectivities and belief systems. Social transformation is the process by which an individual alters the socially ascribed social status of their parents into socially achieved status for themselves. Autobiographies tell life stories focusing on the individual life and women autobiographies strive to give special meaning to their lives. Telling one's own life story is in itself an act of self-emancipation, where one holds full control over one's life and its narration becomes a sign of liberation. Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* is the reflection of such an effort. She doesn't limit herself to the revelation of her own traumatic life, but tries to bring to light the unknown dark lives of thousands of other women leading such turbulent lives under the distorted social norms and conditions.

Tehmina begins her autobiography from the days when she was a child. Due to her dark complexion, she could not become her mother's favourite. Although she obeyed her mother's commands, yet she was never satisfied with Tehmina's behaviour. She mentions in her autobiography:

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 that I did not look obedient. (24)

Thus, since her childhood, Tehmina had to be prepared for a subservient role of a daughter and wife. Her mother knew that being a disobedient child, as she thought Tehmina was, she might have to face various difficulties for adjustment after her marriage, and her married life would not be successful. Tehmina's mother was also a part of the hegemonic block, which reproduced patriarchal norms. Her mother wanted to socialize her by teaching suitable traits of women, desired by the patriarchal society of which she was a part. In the process of socialization, the gender stereotypes are constructed. As Gerda Learner has rightly remarked that, "family plays an important role in creating a hierarchical system as it not only mirrors the order in state and educates its children but also creates and constantly reinforces that order"(127). Thus, family as an institution plays an important role in creating stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Tehmina Durrani cites ample instances of injustice, discrimination, sexual abuse and torture unleashed upon her and other women. The women reconcile to these injustices due to the proliferation of patriarchal and male hegemonic constructs and accept these as their fate. It relates to what Simone de Beauvoir says, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (295). According to this statement by Beauvoir, the roles associated with women are not given to them at the time of birth, by virtue of their biology, but they are rather socially constructed. Women are taught what they’re supposed to be in life, what kind of roles they can or cannot perform in virtue of being women, the second sex. Beauvoir has given childhood an important place in her book, *The Second Sex* (2010), because childhood is the early phase of gender construction, and it is during this childhood phase that the socialization of boy and girl takes place. Another reason for her mother’s strictness towards Tehmina and her siblings could be the “patriarchal bargains” as Deniz Kandiyoti terms it (285). Even though Tehmina’s father never dominated her mother, rather she would every time command him, she made a bargain with her daughter. That is, as the culture and society pressurized her to raise her children properly with full guidance, she herself perhaps found it too much to comply. She even said that she felt ashamed to present Tehmina to her friends and relatives because of her dark skin. Kandiyoti explains, under patriarchy, women “often adhere as far and as long as they possibly can to rules that result in the unfailing devaluation of their labor” (280). Thus this cyclical nature of women’s power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourage a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves.

Tehmina’s second husband, Mustafa also did not spare his daughters from his brutality. Tehmina heard the stories from the servants that when Mustafa’s daughter from his fifth wife, Sherry, “howled as he tried to sleep, Mustafa picked her up and shoved her under the bed!” (113). He was equally ruthless with Naseeba – Mustafa and Tehmina’s daughter. “On a number of occasions, Mustafa stifled Naseeba’s yells with his hand or with a cloth” (113). On another occasion, Mustafa exceeded all his limits and mercilessly inflicted extreme violence on his baby girl for wailing. He pushed Naseeba’s head into the water-filled bathtub and held her there for a few seconds until he was satisfied with the punishment he gave her. He was so merciless that when Tehmina continuously begged for her daughter’s life, he became even more violent. The poor little girl was all shocked and suffocated when finally her mother took her out of the water. Mustafa proved to be tyrannical on girl children because he wanted complete obedience from them as well. The earlier they learned, the better for them, because then these girl children would grow up to be the perfect inferior beings, just the way the patriarchal society wants them to be. In case, the girl children disobeyed his orders, he punished them. Hence, for their “betterment”, the lesson was taught to them with extreme brutality.

Patriarchy and fake religious beliefs are the main reasons for Muslim women’s plight, but there is also one section of this patriarchal system where the dominance of women reaches its extreme form. Tehmina Durrani blames the feudal system that is responsible for the extreme form of torture on women. According to Tehmina, feudal lords think it is their right to subjugate females, whether it is their wives, sisters, housemaids or

even girl children. By its very own crafted law, feudalism gives men the power and authority to be brutal on the so called weaker sex. Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity serves as an analytical tool to identify these attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender inequality. Connell argues "there is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men" because 'all forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men' (186-7). It is clear that compliance to masculine hegemonies is the norm which further gets cultural and ideological support. Tehmina also states that feudalism was a license to plunder, rape and even murder. In the areas that were later to become Pakistan, some feudal families utilized Islam as a weapon of control. The patriarchs were venerated as holy men, who spoke with Allah, and, indeed, at some earlier time many were pious and righteous. But gradually power passed to elder sons who were neither pious nor particularly moral, yet were revered by the illiterate people of the area and perceived as "envoys of Allah" (38). They had the authority to justify their every deed on the basis of their own, quite convenient, interpretation of the Quran. A feudal lord was an absolute ruler who could justify any action (40-41). Thus, gender hierarchies are created and sustained by the relational dynamics of gender and women are greatly subjugated in feudal system. They accept their subordinate position to some extent because the chauvinistic society, especially the feudal lords, have the ability to justify their every action.

In such a tradition, a woman exists and functions merely as the one who propagates the human race; while man possesses social subjectivity, access to language, legal and historical significance. On the contrary, woman, as Julia Kristeva observes in *Powers of Horror* (1982), "...is excluded from knowledge and power ... she is constituted by the tradition as the other, mute and powerless" (21). This exclusion from the public and social life renders women powerless and they become submissive by accepting their lot. But Kristeva further elaborates, women who destroy this notion of 'woman' become abject for the society. Tehmina's autobiography thus stands as one which questions the very notion of conventional femininity just like any other abject. The key fact that needs to be reiterated here is that women like Tehmina can create the sense of abjection within society and within the men around them. They also destroy the very concept of the conventional task roles that have been meted out to the sexes, thus changing psychology of the victim.

Martin Seligman in his inaugural speech as the president of the American Psychological Association commented: "Psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best within ourselves" (3). This transforms a person's thought process and forms a self-protective layer with the potential to change and influence the trajectory of trauma. Tehmina's post-traumatic growth, resistance and recovery helped her in building self identity. The famous comment by German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, "That which does not kill us, makes us stronger" (*Was ihn nicht umbringt, macht ihn starker*) (quoted in Joseph, 2011 p. ix). This means that traumas may configure victories and it is apt in the case of Tehmina who narrated her bitter

experiences and her autobiography is the outcome of her post-traumatic growth. Although her wounds were beyond recovery and resilience yet these became a dynamic of positive and transformative growth following traumatic events.

Tehmina had to confront many issues during the publication of her autobiography because she wrote about certain explicit details and painful truths about Muslim women's plights that were greatly considered as taboo subjects in the Islamic societies. Tehmina Durrani did a courageous act by writing her autobiography. However, it was such a struggle for Tehmina that even her father disowned her after its publication. This tendency of criticizing, rejecting and banning women authors' narratives can be explained through Taslima Nasreen's words. She argues that people who speak against such writings "are insecure misogynists" (2 June, 2018). "This misogyny or male insecurity is only a symptom of the disease that is patriarchy. Until society gets rid of this malady, the symptoms will remain" (2 June, 2018). Therefore, Tehmina emerged as rebel by adopting and advocating justice and solidarity among battered Muslim women. Her autobiography created a literary tradition that enabled her to speak about her experiences. She started to make public her own understanding of the world she lived in and questioned the roles imposed on women. Pam Morris, Professor of Critical Studies and Head of the Research Centre for Literature and Cultural History at Liverpool, asserts that writing provides not only platform for self expression but also gives meaning to their existence as she states:

Finding their own emotions, circumstances, frustrations and desires shared into literary form gave (and continues to give) many women, some for the first time a sense that their own existence was meaningful, that their view of things was valid and intelligent, that their suffering was imposed and unnecessary, and a belief in women's collective strength to resist and remake their own lives. Writing by women can tell the story of the aspects of women's lives that have been erased, ignored, demeaned and mystified and even idealised. (60)

This quest for female identity remains the most prominent struggle that most of the women writers aspire to achieve and Tehmina successfully explored her inner realms through her autobiography. As S.Kumari, an Indian Researcher and critic asserts, "a sense of identity is a perennial sustaining creative force in a writer" (13). For women living in patriarchal societies, writing is considered a comparatively safer and effective medium of communication. This is a creative way to vent out their feelings in the Pakistani society where speaking out can lead to grave consequences. Therefore writing offers a relatively greater freedom to express themselves. Judith Kegan Gardiner, founder of Gender and Women's program at UIC, comments on the female identity:

The author exercises magical control over her character, creating her from representations of herself and her ideals. Yet she must allow her text a limited autonomy. A character's taking on a life of its own can mean that the author shapes her character according to literary convention, social reality as well as according to projections of her representations of herself. The author judges how such a character would behave in the settings the author provides her...thus the author may define herself through the text while creating her female hero. (357)

Therefore, women writers use the texts to construct the female identity by creating female characters as well as by defining themselves, perhaps as an outlet for anger and frustrations or unfulfilled desires. In other words, they seem to be going through the process of defining the self. The feminist literature plays an important role in sharing the sufferings of women and their routes to self-discoveries. The female figures therefore need to break through these confines of the patriarchal society to realise a female identity. Therefore, the new Tehmina who finally survives the oppression learns the importance of 'voicing out' and stresses that:

Silence condones injustice, breeds subservience and fosters malignant hypocrisy.

Mustafa Khar and other feudal lords thrive and multiply on silence. Muslim women must learn to raise their voice against injustice. (362)

She here delineates the importance of voice, by connecting to significant others. This self discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of consciousness. Such discourses of female voices provide identity to the individuals and also encourage others to come forward. Definitely, *My Feudal Lord* marks the beginning of diverse discourses on feminism. Spivak suggests, that 'the role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored.'(269). Tehmina did the same by taking advantage of the literary genre. She registered her complaints and used autobiography as a medium to unveil her life story. She also reveals the fact that Pakistan is still in tight grip of feudal structures and at the same time makes an effort to restore the voice of the subaltern. Like a native informant, Tehmina in Spivakian spirit feels that "literature can provide rhetorical space for subaltern groups to re-articulate the suppressed histories of popular struggles"(124). Her autobiography is a challenging narrative to feudalism and Tehmina, in her practical life breaks her gendered subalternity by taking divorce from her feudal lord, Mustafa Khar, a politician in Pakistan.

The voices of marginalized are often repressed or hidden but when their voices, their tenderness, their desires surface, they become significant part of the society. Similarly, to challenge patriarchal constructions of manhood, female voices have always been important. Pakistani women writers have portrayed their lives under the imposed role of religious, social and economic parameters. Women in Pakistani fiction, however, have been shown constantly changing and developing. *My Feudal Lord* portrays the process of psychological development of Tehmina from a suffering, weeping and subaltern subject to a confident and independent one. Her struggle has been a bitter one because it involves fighting for basic rights as the right to be visible and the right to live with her own identity so that she can make sense of the world she lives in. Men in order to assert their power over women systematically oppress and subdue them. Tehmina holds feudal system, patriarchal society and cultural norms responsible for the subdued position of women in the society of Pakistan. She voices the issues of women by presenting the true picture of hypocritical life and the patriarchal set up of families in Pakistan. Her conscious decision to share her life story, being fully aware about the consequences of opposing and exposing a system and a man who are too powerful to put hurdles in her path in society, serves as a testimony to the utility and power of women's autobiography as a means of feminist resistance.

Tehmina's expose renders her a transformed woman who has shed her docility and submissiveness at great personal price, and she emerged as an individual who refuses to compromise or tolerate oppression in the name of socio-cultural norms and mores. Journalist Shabina Nishat Omar in an article "Marginalized Self and Marginalized Identity: Breaking the Silence in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*"(2008) elaborates that "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"(139).Omar has aptly pointed out that Tehmina has successfully overcome the ordeal of self narration and emerged triumphantly by challenging the norms of Pakistani society. She exposes the duplicity of the ruling class in Pakistan with specific reference to her husband, Mustafa Khar. While narrating the saga of maltreatment, she portrays the hegemonic masculinities and gender politics, prevalent in Pakistan.

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