

**“The Heer and Her Dastaan: The Voicelessness of a Subaltern Woman.”
Feminist Aspect of Tehmina Durrani’s ‘BLASPHEMY’**

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Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves? -Mary Wollstonecraft

“Imaginatively she is of the highest importance: practically she is completely insignificant, she pervades poetry from cover to cover, she is all but absent from history.” Virginia Woolf

Abstract

Homogeneity is not an attribute of life; rather it is its heterogeneous character which makes it so interesting and colourful. The presence of differences also reflects fragmented picture of life wherein the stronger dominate the weaker. In this patriarchal society it is ‘Man’ who is the stronger, the ‘one’ while it is ‘Woman’ who is the weaker, the ‘other’. As Simone de Beauvoir comments: “She is defined and differential with reference to man and not her in reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other” (16).

Keywords: Subaltern, Islam, Inequality, Society, Religious beliefs

Introduction

The 'Otherness' of the weaker sex as referred to, subjugates women into a subordinated position in life, the position of the 'subaltern'. Subalternity is, in other words, a study of the whole concept of 'otherness', hiding in its depths, stories of pain and repression. According to Ajit K. Chaudhary, "The focus of subaltern studies is on the consciousness of the subaltern classes..." (237). The subaltern conscious is thus, one that borders on the realms of neurotic and psychotic behaviour, a result of years of repression, pain, loss, and denial, in the case of millions of women.

Sigmund Freud in his theory of '*Depth Psychology*' formulated the concept of the 'unconscious' which governs the human psyche. This all powerful and all pervading aspect of the psyche is actually storehouse of all emotions and desires, both expressible and inexpressible. Even though the unconscious works in a very dormant and stealthy manner, yet it directs and control human behaviour to a great extent. In this play of the unconscious, it is the society which plays an important role stop performing the role of the creator as suggested by Eric Fromm, it in fact gives a concrete form of the unconscious through its role as a "repressive agent". The control over the psyche is especially more excessive in traditional societies like India and Pakistan, where the women have to confirm to the preconceived images constructed by the specific social order, their life is in fact a perpetual struggle between the natural instincts and desire of an individual, and the restrictions imposed upon it by the society. This continuous struggle that causes repression of the individual's natural instinct and imposes restrictions, ultimately leads to the state neurosis or mental breakdown.

Such play of the mind, the inner workings, confusions and dilemmas of the mind has been a very popular and recurrent theme of the novelists starting from the early twentieth century. Depiction of the unconscious through the portrayal of neurotic and psychotic characters by delving deep into their inner thoughts and emotions has become an integral part of modern fiction. There is after all no other greater mystery than that of the workings of the human mind, with its unfathomable depths and powers. Even Milton in his epic has pointed to this fact when he said, "The mind is its own place and in itself /Can make a Heaven out of Hell, a Hell out of Heaven" (*Paradise Lost Book I*)

Status of women in all over the world has multiple dimensions. In this regard, Islam accords a high place to women. Fatima Mernissi holds that Islam teaches unbiased notion by bringing between male and female (*A Muslim feminist interpretation of women's empowerment and gender parity* 5). Religious beliefs on a large scale, however, are far away from the parity Islam autographs and upgrades. Their prix fixe of gender denied women the opportunity of education and cross social dialogues which in turn left a white gap between male and female. This paper seeks to highlight Tehmina Durrani's description of the backward status of and the longevity of gender inequality in Muslim society. Side by side it also venture to point out that women in Islam are no doubt lacking behind their male counterpart and their backwardness this is not because of Islamic teachings, instead it is due to the guises of religious beliefs. Using this as touchstone, the attempt is also made to explain that the Islamic scriptures have been seized by male in Muslim societies, and they interpret it to have control over women. Simone de Beauvoir's understanding of gender will be used as theoretical basis of this present paper. Apart from Simon, Michael Foucault's theory of power will also be used to underline how power helps exploiting knowledge and how knowledge in turn perpetuates inequality and discrimination.

Historical status of women

Dream of an unbiased society remains a distant dream in the absence of parity between men and women. The basic parameter of a good and just society lies in the fair treatment of its men and women without any biasness and pre-existed notions. History bears witness to the fact that women have always occupied a secondary (as other) role as compared to men.

Muscularity has always been considered to be "absolute human type" the touchstone for humanity. The history of women's past in almost all civilizations had been very much exposed. Aristotle, great philosopher, once said: "the female is a female by virtue of certain lack of qualities" (*Gender and History* 30). Niccolo Machiavelli too disregards women "... fortune is female and if you want to stay on the top of her you have to slap and thrust" (101). History talks highly about Greek civilization and claims that it had been the golden civilization among all ancient civilizations. In Greek civilization women were looked down upon morally and socially. An imaginary woman called Pandora is thought to be the source of all evil in Greek mythology (*Purdah and the status of women in Islam ch.2 p.4*). It is supposed in Judeo Christian societies that human being gets birth in sin. The responsibility of this ostensible sin is placed solely on

Eve, because Eve is believed to have caused Adam to commit the sin. Hence, she is guilty of that sin and was punished not forgiven (*Holy Bible Genesis 03:16*). Falling in line with Greek and Judeo Christian civilization, the pre-Islamic or Jahiliyyah (*Milestone 19*). Civilization used to bury their girl child alive, for they thought girls would bring shame to them. (*From Jahiliyyah to Islamic worldview 216*). With the arrival of Islam, the long history of women's oppression and exploitation got a death blow. Turning the age-old anti-women tradition upside down, Islam held women in high esteem: "Heaven lies beneath the feet of mothers" (*status of women in Islam 22*). It means one deserves paradise if one serves one's mother well. Apart from this, Islamic scriptures (*Hadith and Qur'an*) possess splendid verses which speak explicitly about the well-being of women. Islam brought radical changes in the society of Arabia in all aspects and particularly with respect to women. Keeping aside the patriarchal norms of the seventh century it conferred property, divorce and inheritance rights to women as asserted in Qur'an "And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them. ('The right against them stands for marriage and divorce rights') (02:228). Bolstering this practice of Islam Sir Charles Edward Archibald Hamilton says "Islam teaches that men and women have come from the same essence, possess the same soul and have been equipped with same capabilities for intellectual, spiritual and moral attainments (*quoted in Prophet Muhammad in the Bible 320*). It is Islam which liberated women refuting the concept of original sin of Judeo Christian civilization saying: "Both suffered the consequence and both apologized profusely" (*Qur'an 07:23*). Therefore, Islam gave utmost emphasis upon the welfare of women to bring parity between both the sexes right from the beginning of its existence.

Framework of the Novel 'Blasphemy'

Tehmina Durrani, a Pakistani literary author, a social right activist, and a renowned feminist, for the very first time dared to show the dark spirituality of the so-called Man of God in her third literary work *Blasphemy*. *Blasphemy* inspired from a true story, carries chilling accounts of brutal evils like murder, molestation, rape, distortion of religious scripts, hypocrisy and much more, done by Pir Sain, a saint at the shrine located in southern part of Pakistan. "For *Blasphemy* is a raw, disturbing and harrowing tale of religious exploitation and the distortion of Islam by predatory religious leaders or Pirs as they are known in Pakistan" (*Desai, 2018*). It was feared that it would be banned as it carries crude truth behind the religious imposters, the fake Pirs who

are ruling the minds of the people for centuries. (Mubarak 2015). (Raza, 2011) highlights that the novel carries the most shocking description of a Pir who is Heer's (the wife of Pir and the narrator of the story) words "To me, my husband was my son's murderer. He was always my daughter's molester a parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night. He was Bhai's destroyer, Amma Sain's tormentor, Ma's humbler and the people's exploiter. He was the rapist of orphans and the fiend that fed the weak. But over and above all this, he was known to be the man closest to Allah, one who could reach him and save us." (Raza, 2011).

Tehmina Durrani is one of the very focal feminists and advocates of women's voice in Pakistan. She is not only a social activist but also widely read author. She came up with her first autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord* (1994) after her abusive marriage to one of the most powerful feudal Lords of the country full stock does she spoke up for the rights of oppressed woman and give them a voice through her own narrative. This study is based on her second novel which is also based on real story called *Blasphemy* (1994). This novel proved to be a ground breaking work as it was written on the much tabooed topics of feudal and Pir system of religion, incest, prostitution and child marriage in the name of religion. Durrani's novel was a brave first step to expose the heinous crimes being committed in the name religion in various unaware parts of the country.

Pir system exists as an offshoot off the Sufi Saints (Subhan 1999) and their teachings but has now become a cancerous sore for the society as Ansari (1992) explains in his *Sufi Saints and State Power: The Pirs of Sindh*. The Pirs leave no bound untouched to abuse the powers conferred upon them in the name of religion. Tehmina Durrani took up the job to speak up against this oppression specifically against women by their feudal and Pir system

The present novel *Blasphemy* instant becomes very popular. Along with praise for the selection of such a bold topic, it was heavily criticised and playing to malign the name of Islam. Many aspects of this novel have been explored by various people. Iqbal, Arshad and zaib (2014) discussed the *Collapse of Self, Emotion and Islamic Values* in the light of this novel. Yaquob (2015) discussed the novel in feminist light in her paper "*Consequence Raising in South Asian women's fiction in English: A feminist Critique*". Similarly, kesarewani 2012 analysed the novel through a similar lens his paper, "*Patriarchy, Religion and Women:An Analysis of telling*

Tehmina Durrani's Blasphemy". Kumari and Waheed (2016) reviewed the novel through the lens of patriarchal apparatus in their work '*inner voice of the insurgent women in Patriarchy Ethnicity*'. Although all major characters of Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* reflect oppressed condition of women, the novel has not been viewed in the light of subaltern theories particularly through the lens provided by Spivak as the work mainly revolves around voiceless and marginalised women. Through Heer, the main protagonist Tehmina also tries to make us understand that "Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do- something we perform". (*qtd. in Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice Translation and Gender Studies 129*). Similarly sex is natural and biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential of the one hand, gender is social and traditional exposition and elaboration of sex on the other. *Simon de Beauvoir* worked out this disagreement between sex and gender skilfully seriously and comes out to a conclusion that "one is not born, but rather become a woman" (*The Second Sex 14*). She tries to underline that it is not her physical state which legitimizes her destiny as a woman; it is the society instead which construct her image as a woman.

The novel *Blasphemy* revolves around the daily lives of women living together in a village and especially in the harem of a local Pir, a clergyman, is the devil in human form who projected himself to be "pious" and "Islamic scholar" among the masses and acts like a feudal Lord. The novel is set in South of Pakistan where most of the population is uneducated and unaware of human basic rights. The novel is based around a female protagonist Heer who is married off to the Pir Sain as his third wife after the death of his first two wives. At very beginning the story opens painful chapters of child marriage and marital rape. Heer is just fifteen years old when she is married to Pir Sain who is almost double her age. Because of the wealth and status he has, Heer's mother happily declares this chance of status when Heer is engaged to Pie Sain saying, "What an honour. We are not worthy of so much. Our destiny has taken a turn. We are now going the privileged few" (*Durrani 1999*). According to Spivak, this change of status holds great significance. Heer's family was previously oppressed because they held a subaltern position in the society, while the Pir Sain was an ultimate symbol of wealth and power. Thus he belonged to the category of the local elite that oppresses the masses after decolonization. Change of status here signifies a desperate attempt to leap out of the subaltern position and gain voice on the basis of marital wealth, but as Heer is a woman and so is doubly colonized, so we see that even after

getting out of our subaltern position at one level, she is further oppressed inside her home by her monster's husband. She once said, "... my mind was consumed with the idea of purdah. From behind it no call for help would be heard. An abandoned species was trapped in a forbidden world. Everything corrupt happened under the shroud, when it was off faceless and nameless woman appeared" (*Durrani's Blasphemy*).

Heer's character is an ideal subaltern and very bold character throughout the novel. She tries in vain to raise her voice or to make a difference but every time she is clutched back by the shackles of patriarchy. When Heer receives her first beating, she is reminded of her otherwise caring father who used to beat her mother sometimes. Her mother always defended her husband by saying, "Employment, frustrations, financial worries, social pressures and misunderstanding trigger off his outburst". (*Durrani, 1999 p. 43.*) Thus being a man, he could use his power inside home anytime and would be given an excuse on the basis of financial pressures. This shows that in the subalternity of women, class is not the only thing that is involved. Heer undergoes all sorts of physical, verbal and psychological abuse in her marriage with Pir Sain. She is beaten through all means of torture and is emotionally tortured when she has to see her husband's incestuous eyes find her daughter. Here the young protagonist in Heer becomes a tool of her husband's oppression and keeps providing him little girls to satiate his pedophilic needs. When he has not enough of that, he forces Heer into prostitution and homosexuality to satisfy his own whimsical fetishes. She is silenced but her own thoughts and her daughter Guppi also tells her to do the same when she discussed about the little girl Yathimri sacrificed for Pir Sain's wishes. "Ammamma when there is no choice, it is better to do nothing. Let it be as it is. However it is." (*Durrani 1999*). This is an ideal example of how a subaltern voice is suppressed at all levels and the subaltern loses her agency. He is not just quieted by the oppressive powers but is also advised the same by the oppressed because they are conditioned to believe that their voice would not be heard. Heer's narrative of the first night details about the lack of genuine emotion but over occupation of sexual hunger, "he had commenced our wedding night with an animal haste for food and ended it satisfied" (*Durrani, 39*). Apart from his wife's including Heer, all the female servants of the haveli Yathimiri, Kaali, cheel remain his silent victims. In the secret, unseen Chamber of the shrine, he used his own wife to be with different men, who used to call for such purpose. Pir Sain was filming us... he was orchestrating, directing, losing his temper, repeating his orders and arranging our bodies" (*Durrani's, 161*). Peer again says, "the custodian

of the people revered for adherence of the faith concealed his skin under my burqa. it allowed him to introduce me as a whore because no one had ever laid his eyes on the venerable wife of Pir” (Durrani, 164).

Bound with fear and hesitation, people around Pir never questioned his so called position as a pious person. It is the Heer, protagonist and the wife of Pir who brings out misdeeds of feet into public domain. She exposes the hypocrisies of her husband, Pir who reduced women to an object of sex. Heer says, “Pir Sain spoke but only of sex. planning the next act, discussing the last one, seeking opinions on new one, comparing it to another one, until the matter took up my entire life” (Blasphemy, 138). She seeks to highlight that her position to her husband called Pir Sain is not like a human being, a wife and a woman but only as an object of sex to satisfy his animal desire. As soon as, he gets his carnal desires satisfied, he casts her aside and does not give her even a second look. In fact Islam looks at both men and women in equal terms and proclaims the ‘mantra’ of equality at several places. Contrary to what Pir Sain practices, Islam says: “only a man of noble character will honour women and only a man of base intentions will dishonour them” (qtd in Women in Islam Shari’ah 17). Pir committed the most heinous crime against the orphan girl called Yathimiri. The author puts the whole scenario of a child rape quite vividly: A wounded baby dear with frightened eyes lay on the floor. Her mouth was stuffed with his handkerchief, her torso was naked, and her child like breasts bore teeth marks” (Blasphemy, 112). Pir did claim himself to be the defender of faith but his misdeeds are not in consonance with Islamic teachings. He only pays lip service to Islam and distorts Islamic teaching to fulfil his ulterior motives instead. Besides emphasising on the equal rights of women, Islam speaks about the security and safety of orphan as well as it says in Qur’an, “Therefore, treat not the orphan with harshness” (93: 09). Therefore, women have been accorded a high place in Islam but person Pir turns a deaf ear to the call of Islam and dishonour women. Having turned a deaf ear to the Islamic ideal of equality between the sexes, Muslim societies get disappointed at the birth of a female child: “when a girl is born we mourn her as a risk of our honour”, she would lament. “When a son is born, we celebrate, because a protector has arrived” (Blasphemy, 132) contrary to what is being practised in Muslim society societies today also Islamic proclaims: “O Mankind, We have created you from a male and female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another” (Quran 49: 13).

Conclusion

Through Heer, novel Blasphemy, Durrani emphasises experience of an average woman living in oppression. this study shows how a woman like Heer, tries to raise her voice but not only changing her social class to be heard but also by using the exploitation of her womanhood to demand justice. However, the fate of the protagonist Heer and other women in the novel clearly shows how the subalterns are constantly pushed back to their original position especially if they are women. They are either not allowed to raise their voice and if they try to do so, their voice is immediately silenced. The only way to successful and safe existence of a woman subaltern is to stay quite in the face of tyranny and oppression.

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