

Empowering Women's Voices through Life Narratives

A Study of Tehmina Durani's *My Feudal Lord*

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Abstract

Knowledge, truth and reality have traditionally been perceived and disseminated from a patriarchal perspective. This has resulted in the domination of language and literature by men stifling the female voice, role and representation. This has created a need for an alternate expression. Women's writing has given a new meaning to their experiences and understanding of their lives. The art of story telling by women has emerged as a protest against social order and cultural perversion. The multiplicities of the identities of women have redefined new roles and opportunities for them.

Life narratives such as autobiographies, memoirs, biographies, diaries, travel accounts, ethnographies and oral histories by women combine the personal with the social, cultural and political to establish alternate voices to understand female identity, selfhood and sexuality. The present research paper focuses on Pakistani feminism in the light of Tehmina Durani's autobiography *My Feudal Lord*.

The construction of micro-narratives is indispensable to deconstruct the history of grand narratives to understand life histories in their proper contexts. The genre of life narratives has created a new literary space for ghettoised women to document their experiences, to speak for themselves and to explore their sensibilities through these micro-narratives making them active subjects in the making of their own histories.

The different genres of life narratives portray multitude of stories and situations to identify and discover and understand alternate realities. The canvas of life narratives is broad as it situates the texts in their historical, political and socio-cultural milieu and, therefore, explores how feminist historiography could be an alternate narrative to dominant discourse with the aim to re-embodiment the female self and claim narrative power across different cultures to construct their identities. These narratives also navigate caste, culture and violence to understand the truth about and around the gendered selves.

Keywords: Life Narrative, Ghettoised, Micro-Narrative, Historiography.

Introduction

Pakistan gained independence in 1947. It has been greatly affected by feudal culture. During the course of these years it also witnessed many political upheavals. There is not a single image of a Pakistani woman. She can be recognised as an illiterate tribal woman, like Sidhwa's Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride*. And at the same time she can be highly affluent, educated and urbanised as reflected in Tehmina Durani's *My Feudal Lord*. She finds herself in every situation where she works like a peasant, a labourer, a home maker, a writer or an activist. Bearing the wounds of customs like Vani, karo Kari and laws like Hudood Ordinance, a common Pakistani woman has brutally witnessed the miscarriage of justice.

'Vani' is a cultural custom still prevalent in many parts of Pakistan wherein young girls are married without their consent as part of punishment for a crime committed by a male member of her family.

Karo means a black man, and Kari a black woman. 'Black' symbolises evil. Karo-kari is an honour killing practice still prevalent in Sindh province of Pakistan. Hudood Ordinance of 1979 strengthened patriarchal beliefs and practices in Pakistan which victimised women of committing

adultery as the burden of proof of rape with the victim making her the perpetrator of crime. The ordinance failed to make a distinction whether the sexual act by a woman has been committed willingly or forcibly. After twenty five years of resistance the ordinance was modified under the women's Protection Act, 2006. The stories of torment are not only confined to a particular community but upper class women of Pakistan too have a story to narrate.

Scope & Aim of the Study

Women's textual representation cannot be disconnected from her cultural representations. The archetype of behaviour, thinking and outlook have been internalised by women and in this process many experiences have been masked and many stories dissembled. The aim of the present study is to understand the unknown to construct alternate realities that can act as counter discourse to the stereotype. Life narratives self examine the authors and engage them at many levels to speak the truth not only about one self but also around them. Constructing micro narratives of history, culture and politics in the academia, and, therefore, eliminate the notion that personal is not political is the need of the hour. The recuperation of these voices will make the discourse of gendering representation more argumentative and vibrant. This allows space for women to re-organise and re-position patriarchal discourses.

Review of Literature

Tehmina Durrani writes about the subordinated and marginal position of women in Pakistani society. Her autobiography reflects female subjugation and sufferings encountered by the majority of women in the conservative Pakistani society. She articulates her own experiences in the light of political, religious and social-cultural contexts responsible for the plight of women in the society. Her own personality is subdued by these norms and she chooses to suffer and rationalise with highly objectionable realities around her.

Tehmina born into an influential Pakistani family fights all parental opposition and marries Anees. She leaves him for Mustafa Khar, a prominent political figure in Pakistan. Mustafa, a champion of democracy, on the personal front turns out to be a habitual wife abuser. Tehmina faces much emotional turbulence only to become stronger to deal with the misfortunes in her life.

My Feudal Lord is divided into three parts, i.e. 'Lion of Punjab', 'Law of Jungle', and 'Lioness'. Throughout these sections one can trace the metamorphosis of Tehmina from a meek housewife to a fierce social crusader fighting for her husband's release from prison and later for her own freedom from the clutches of her husband.

My Feudal Lord (1995) is a prototype of a repressed women's condition. It has been written unambiguously and specifically in Pakistani context referring to the plight of women in a highly affluent society. It studies how the writer is conditioned to the insincere and dominating treatment by her husband. Tehmina faces the physical, sexual and psychological violence by her husband and yet subverts all the

cultural and gender roles. She gathers courage to divorce her husband in a conservative society and rejects ostentatious and undignified life.

Analysis

Tehmina Durani, a Pakistani based author and human rights activist marries second time Ghulam mustafa Khar, a politician who had earlier been married five times. She breaks this marriage after thirteen years and writes her experiences in her autobiography *My Feudal Lord* which still invites attention for its audacity. Depicting the feudal set up, Durani depicts the power of feudal families in politics, national affairs and bureaucracy. The narrative reflects on Pakistani politics, society, leadership and the values, and beliefs they uphold and their attitude towards women who are generally treated as material beings.

My Feudal Lord explores Durani's traumatic marital life apart from unveiling the 'self-righteousness' of the political elites of Pakistan. It encompasses a struggle against patriarchy and oppression. Her narrative reflects on the prototypes of behaviours and their internalisation by women as she brings the unknown outside the household to construct counter discourse against power structures.

The narrative is a journey of Tehmina's transformation from a docile to a liberated and assertive individual who overpowers an authoritative and conservative husband in an environment where education and religion are subservient to cultural norms. Her protracted silence is deeply rooted in the Pakistani cultural norms where a woman is particularly expected to bear children and satiate the sexual desires of her husband.

Her father, a highly educated man counsels her not to file for divorce as she can only leave his home in a coffin. And her mother guides her to deal with her eccentric husband like a psychiatrist. To defy patriarchy in such a conservative society where everything is in the hands of men, women can hardly express themselves as they have been conditioned to remain silent to injustices meted out to them. This has resulted in their low self-esteem. Men have the right to make decisions for women family, tribe, community and society. Durani tries to uphold the ethos and sanctity of marriage till the very last when she finally gives up feeling that she has been rewarded with infidelity.

Getting infatuated with Mustafa Khar's attire and looks, Durani deserts her first husband to marry him only to discover a misogynist who takes pride in his misogyny. He derives his authority from patriarchal practices. Durani writes, "I had no power, no rights and no will of my own". His slanderous use of language and the abuses he inflicts on his wife reflect his sexist outlook. He shouts at her for speaking so long with her brother. "Is he your brother or your lover?" he asks her. She looked at her violent husband and replied in astonishing manner, "He is my brother, Mustafa, really." (133). on her reply, he gets ruder "Are you answering me back?" He beats her with his fists. (133). Mustafa Khar performs a typical role of a patriarch and of a masculine oppressor as well as an unjust, unruly man.

The denigration of female sexuality through cultural practices comes alive in Durani's work. The female body and the self-witness turbulence to comply with the male cultural constructed norms decimating the very essence of the female self and subjectivity. She writes, "He continued to use my first marriage as a stick to beat me with; my divorce and remarriage had proved to him that I was capable of adultery. This produced complete sexual confusion in me. I was afraid that my slightest response to his advances would reinforce his image of me as a common slut." (106)

She further writes, "A feudal lord was an absolute ruler who could justify any action". "Mustafa's obsessions took perverse forms. Whenever he saw me laughing or joking with my parents, his mood darkened, and I knew that the next moment we were alone he would find a pretext for an argument that would lead to violence." (158)

Durrani's work illustrates patriarchal aggression as she is humiliated for questioning male dominance. Whenever she tries to defy, she is beaten and humiliated by her husband. She writes, "Later, in our bedroom, my insolence was punished with yet another sharp slap. He called me an exhibitionist, a woman without shame." (216)

Law of the Jungle portrays overthrow of Bhuttos's government by General Zia's coup and immigration of Khar and Tehmina to London. The couple live in Tehmina's parents house. Tehmina's visit to a male gynaecologist in London makes Khar feel shamed. It hurts his male sexual ego and he beats Tehmina for this 'unforgiving' act. On the other hand he felt no sense of guilt while being in a relationship with Tehmina's sister, Adeela. The feudal Khar thinks women as his properties. The exposition of this affair incites Tehmina to think of divorce for the first time but she keeps on reconciling sometimes in the name of her children, sometimes in the name of her family honour and sometimes for the lack of strength to bear this all. This is further compounded by her parents lack of support who groomed her to leave her husband only in a coffin.

However, she cultivates not just resilience but also strength from the tumultuous events of her life. She gathers courage to throw a hot pot at Mustafa and, therefore, causes pain to him. (188)

On another occasion he wants to strike her, but Tehmina reacts. 'Don't be foolish, Mustafa. Grow up. Talk to me like an adult.' She further reacts by kicking him in the belly and pulling his hair. (189)

Lioness reflects the dichotomy in Tehmina as woman but it wraps the journey of her womanhood with a new consciousness. "I agreed I was not ashamed and pointed out, 'It's you who have been humiliated tonight, not me. You are angry because I have caused you shame.'" (216).

Tehmina demands divorce from Khar. On such a bold decision, he isolates Tehmina and keeps her away from her children. She provides him another chance but it is said that mistakes can be rectified, not instincts. Khar remains loyal to his instincts of lust and power which finally convinces Tehmina to seek divorce. This costs her financial support, custody of her four children and abandonment by her parents. The insight into the new consciousness makes her a social and a political outcast. She seems to have lost the left out self-esteem but musters courage to convey Mustafa Khar that she has a story of her own to tell. When Mustafa calls her and says, "Tehmina, you are nothing any more once you were Begum Tehmina Khar. Now you are just Tehmina Durrani. When you ring up people, you have to introduce yourself as my ex wife". She answers, "Well Mustafa, now the world will soon know you only as Tehmina Durrani's ex-husband" (382).

This suggests that Durani has an agency to confess and protest. The narration of the events that took place in her life makes her not only as an agent of social change but purgates her of the smothered emotions.

Conclusion

Feminism has emerged as a social, political and cultural movement. It has also taken a shape of an extreme kind of activism. It is generally perceived as a resistance to patriarchal power. Durani is the protagonist of her work *My Feudal Lord*. She overpowers the constraints imposed by the patriarchal practices and emerges successful in regaining the control over her life. The self revelation genre revisits many aspects including emotional turbulence in relation to the societal setups. Telling her own story negotiates at emotional, social, political and cultural levels helping the author to discover her own self without any fear and seek catharsis of the trauma and pain deeply integrated with her life. Her narrative reflects on the prototypes of behaviours and their internalisation by women.

The sexual awakening, victimization and emotional suppression of female sexuality highlight how women's bodies are effectively controlled and exploited through cultural traditions.

My Feudal Lord questions the roles and responsibilities of men and women as husbands and wives. To respect family as an institution is not only the responsibility of a woman but equally of man too. Khar takes his wives for granted as playful objects without lending them any reverence and dignity. Durani resists this humiliation and writes back to the cultural fiefdom to tell her story. She successfully constructs her micro narrative in the feudal backdrop. What's important is that she finds an agency to register her protest against the social order which has long been oppressing women in spite of class, caste, region, religion and language. Durani has no role models to follow. She becomes her own mentor, her own model by bringing out the narrative to construct counter discourse against power structures. "I decided

to cast a stone at hypocrisy. I decided to write this book and break the traditional silence." (375)

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