

Women and Religion in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis of Tehmina Durrani's Blasphemy; A Novel

Abstract

The present study is an attempt to highlight the condition of women in patriarchal society where religion is used as a medium to exploit women. Through Tehmina Durrani's novel *Blasphemy* it is shown that how women are treated in this socio-cultural society.

Keywords: Religion, Women, Patriarchy, Blasphemy, Exploitation and Power.

Introduction

"No nation can rise to the height of glory unless their women are side by side with them.....It is crime against humanity that our women are shut up with in the four walls of the houses as prisoners.".....Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Father of Nation.

But, the reality is totally different. Women are supposed to play a passive role in society and to live according to the age old norms which are only for women. They undergo a complex series of subjugation and are left unequipped to plead or fight against the injustice hurled upon them. They are supposed to follow the rules and regulations set up by the male members of their family and society. Throughout the history, we can see that women are exploited for one or the other reason by the male dominated society.

Actually, women victimization is one of the evils confronting women all over the world. The society of Pakistan is no different from any other male obsessed society. They are always oppressed part of the society. Women being extremely vulnerable are easy targets of any form of oppression, humiliation, deprivation and discrimination, and this patriarchal social system uses religion as a medium to exploit women and disinherit from all rights silencing their voice. Religion which is associated with God and goodness treats men and women in equal terms with humanity and humility. But the patriarchal system flourishing, the mediators made religion patriarchal in nature started misusing it to victimize and subjugate women. That is what Tehmina Durrani, the Pakistani writer has shown in her novel *Blasphemy*.

Tehmina Durrani was born into an educated and influential family and was only 17 when she got married to Anees Khan. She divorced him in 1976 and then married to Mustafa Khar. Thirteen years of her marriage with Khar are considered the worst period of her life resulting in divorce thereby losing the custody of her children as well as economic support. Thus, Tehmina Durrani suffered at the hands of the dominant regime and thus is aware of women's horrible plight in Muslim society. Through her story, she represents the very mirror of every woman who undergoes such turbulent life and is unable to raise a voice against these age old norms that are only for women. She has attempted to create an awareness and consciousness among people, regarding the destructive impact of patriarchal norms. It was the call of the hour to speak out, breaking the age old silence.

Her novel *Blasphemy* is a continuation of her indictment of the corrupt religious system of Pakistan. In it she exposes the corrupt nature of religious leaders, the evils like polygamy, rape and child molestation at heart wrenching level. In *Blasphemy* through the narrative of her protagonist, Heer exposes the devilish character of a holy man Pir Sain who uses religion to subjugate women in the haveli. However, he is considered closest to God. As Heer reveals:

"To me, my husband was my son's murderer. He was also 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 the rapist of orphans and fiend that fed on the weak. But over and above all this, he was known to be the man closest to



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Allah, the one who could reach Him and save us" (Durrani 1999, 143).

In this corrupt social system, Heer, a girl of fifteen, is married to Pir Sain, a man of her father's age only for social status. It appears as a kind of contract to gain the honor and dignity in the community. As Heer's mother is very happy at this marriage because she thinks the dignity of her family would be restored by this marriage. She says,

"We are extremely lucky. After your father's death, people didn't think we were worth anything. Your marriage will restore our dignity in the community. Your sisters marry well and your brother will get a good girl and a good job. Our status will improve tremendously....." (Durrani 1999, 25).

But the marriage proves a curse for Heer. Pir Sain abuses her body on the very first night of their marriage. Afterwards, he controls her mind and soul and Heer is forcibly adapted to a life which no human being can bear. She is confined in the four walls of the haveli. At the age of fifteen, she is thrust with the responsibility of the household, where a slight mistake could call upon the wrath of Pir, at times kicking her, beating or inflicting abuses upon her. She gradually realised that Pir was a hypocrite, who concealed his heinous crimes under the name of Allah. The "green chadder embroidered with the ninety-nine names of Allah"(1999,44) that Pir wore over his shoulder is symbolic. It reflects the way Pir covered his crime and misled people in the name of the divine.

Through the character of Pir Sain, Tehmina shows the dark and secret lives of religious leaders who use Islam to attain power and exploit the weak. Sain proclaimed himself a chosen one who has the power to communicate with Allah because of his holy ancestry. Such religious leaders are shown to be imposters, who exploit people in the name of Allah. Toti, the supernatural woman in the novel who meets Heer, reveals to her that the 'Shrine' was constructed by the British, to control the people of their area, making the shrine a prosperous business, tormenting the people and making them suffer in the "hell they had created" (Durrani 1999,89). Thus power makes these religious leaders savages feeding upon their prey, religion being only a veil to cover up their mistakes.

It is not only Heer to be exploited and violated physically, sexually and mentally by Pir Sain. There are many other women characters who become victims in the hands of him. All female characters have no individual personality of their own self. Every female servant in and around the haveli and Pir's wives have to obey him. They are never permitted to think about their true identity and chastity. They

become a victim of Pir's everyday sexual pleasures. There is a powerful character in the novel, Cheel, who pays silent service in the haveli, indirectly bore a physical abuse, as her long, unmoving posture to keep watch over the activities in the haveli, led ants enter her body through her feet and rot up her body that led her painful death. "Her presence was likened to the dead who would not speak except on Judgment day" (Durrani 1999, 51). It becomes unbearable when Pir Sain's cruel eyes goes to his own little daughter, Guppi and tries to molest her. Heer tries to escape her daughter by offering other girls to Pir Sain.

In this novel, we see that women are allowed to read only Arabic version of Quran. Guppi is permitted to read only Arabic Quran. She does not even understand the single word of Quran. As she questions about it to her mother, Heer and says,

"...I don't understand Arabic. How can I commit myself to Allah without knowing what I commit to? How can I make a promise without knowing what to keep? Allah knows that I don't understand what I read" (Durrani, 1999, 104).

It becomes clear from Guppi's statement that women don't understand what Quran says about them. They are deprived of the real meaning of it. Thus, the novel tells about the power of religious leaders in a society of illiterate people. Tehmina Durrani has successfully exposed the mullahs and maulvis of Pakistan in black magic and makes the innocent people their followers. But when someone tries to point a finger at them, he or she is subdued by saying that the accuser is guilty of Blasphemy.

Thus *Blasphemy* is a serious comment on the challenges faced by Muslim societies in general and Muslim women in particular. The shattering identities of Islamic values and the deterioration of emotions in it are a commentary not on Islam but on the struggle of Muslim against all that is contrary to what Islam stands for. Though it seems unbelievable yet it remains a reality which is done under the disguise of religion in our rural societies.

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