

Chilling Wails in ‘Balsphemey’ By Tehmina Durrani

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ABSTRACT

“To me, my husband was my son’s murderer. He was also my daughter’s molester. A parasite nibbling on the Holy Book...” (143)

Tehmina Durrani, a Pakistani author, made her sensational literary debut in 1991 with her controversial autobiography, *My Feudal Lord*. The autobiography had a touch of ready-to burn-to ashes fire. In order to punish the wrong-doer, in order to punish the feudal patriarchs who would put their women to inhuman shame by making them walk naked on the street publicly. The autobiography was followed by a novel *Blasphemy* (1998), her next major work that promised to generate the same degree of excitement. Set in South Pakistan, the novel inspired by a true story, is a searing study of evil; an uncompromising look at the distortion of Islam by predatory religious leaders. In prose of great power and intensity, the author tells the tragic story of the beautiful Heer, brutalized and corrupted by Pir Sain, the man of God, whom she is married to when she is barely fifteen. But, she enters a hell and is locked into a nightmare and she is not the only sufferer but entire clan owes allegiance to the pir. In the pir’s haveli every day and every night brings unspeakable horrors and all in the name of Allah. Sucked into the fetid hell of her lord’s making, Heer loses her dignity, her freedom, even her humanity, till a terrible resolution gives her back to herself. This book by Tehmina serves as a mirror to the feudalistic society in Pakistan and the social evils prevalent in the society in the contemporary times. This research paper would be an attempt to make a detailed study of the story and analyze the social status of women in the contemporary society. As the book was published only two decades ago it can be said that it would help derive the condition of women in present times in the society.

Date of Submission: 11-11-2017

Date of acceptance: 23-11-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Tehmina Durrani was born in an educated and influential family. Her father, Shahkur Ullah Durrani, was the Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan, and the managing director of Pakistan International Airlines.

At seventeen, she married Anees Khan, and they had one daughter together. Durrani and Khan divorced in 1976. Durrani later married Ghulam Mustafa Khar, a former Chief Minister and Governor of Punjab. Khar had been married five times. Durrani and Khar had four children. After being abused by Khar for several years, she ended her marriage of thirteen years in divorce.

As of 2003, Durrani is married to thrice-elected Chief Minister of Punjab, Mian Shahbaz Sharif. They were married in a private ceremony in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Durrani resides at Raiwind Palace in Lahore with her husband, who is a part of the politically prominent Sharif family, and the brother of Nawaz Sharif, the Ex- Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Tehmina Durrani, made her sensational literary debut in 1991 with her controversial autobiography, *My Feudal Lord*. The autobiography had a touch of ready-to burn-to ashes fire. In order to punish the wrong-doer, in order to punish the feudal patriarchs who would put their women to inhuman shame by making them walk naked on the street publicly.

In the male-structured and male-dominated society women are still in search of their worth and their identity. As Barbara Deckard in *The Women’s Movement : Political, Socioeconomic, and Psychological Issues* (nd) begins with a question "what is woman?" (1). And she says that this question has been asked over and over again, in past and present. It has also been answered many times, but, by whom? By men, who seems to consider himself as an expert on the nature of women. And these experts discard women by calling them emotional, passive and dependent beings who are subordinate to male. Her job is to produce children and become a mother, which according to men is the only work women can perform well.

Barbara Deckard quotes views of different religion as follows,

A Hindu Code of Manu declared, "In childhood a woman must be subject to her father; in youth to her husband; when her husband is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be free of subjugation." (6)

She has quoted the sayings of Mohammedan sacred text, Koran. It says,

"Men are superior to women on account of the qualities in which God has given them pre-eminence." (6)

She has also quoted the profound sayings of Confucius. It goes as follows,

The five worst infirmities that afflict the female are indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy and silliness Such is the stupidity of woman's character, that it is incumbent upon her, in every particular, to distrust herself and obey her husband. (7)

Barbara Deckard holds religions responsible, to a greater extent, for the oppression of women because, the great religions of the world are mostly overpowered by sexism or gender discrimination.

II. WOMEN IN MUSLIM COUNTRIES

Talking about Islamic countries in whole, subjugation of women is not new for them. It has emanated from the feudal structures in pre-Islamic societies. This society always had father as a ruler of the family unit and wives and daughters, as Freda Hussain quotes in *Muslim Women* (1984), "were referred to interchangeably as slaves." (4)

Freda Hussain has quoted from a book by Ayatollah Motahhari, *Nezam Hughughe Zan Dar Islam* (The System of Women's Rights in Islam) (1974). According to him man is considered to be, "the slave of his passions", while women, "desires of affection".

The greatest insult to a woman is for her husband to say I do not love you, I hate you. Since a man is a 'slave of his passions' the institution of polygamy is justified. Veiling (hedgej), it is necessary for women to cover themselves or else the temptations for women could lead to adultery, premarital sex, rape, prostitution etc. Both sexuality and motherhood are considered important for women but each has to be satisfied within the sphere of marriage. (47)

Blasphemy (1998) a much talked about novel by Tehmina Durrani generated the same degree of excitement. Set in South Pakistan, the novel inspired by a true story, is a searing study of evil; an uncompromising look at the distortion of Islam by predatory religious leaders. In prose of great power and intensity, the author tells the tragic story of the beautiful Heer, brutalized and corrupted by Pir Sain, the man of God, whom she is married to when she is barely fifteen. But, she enters a hell and is locked into a nightmare and she is not the only sufferer but entire clan owes allegiance to the pir. In the pir's haveli every day and every night brings unspeakable horrors and all in the name of Allah. Sucked into the fetid hell of her lord's making, Heer loses her dignity, her freedom, even her humanity, till a terrible resolution gives her back to herself.

The entire story is narrated by Heer in flashback. The novel begins with the death of the *Pir Sain*, Heer's husband, her master, her molester, her tormentor and the one who was the murderer of his son and a molester of his own daughter. Heer, who had been married, or it won't be an exaggeration to say that she was sold, at the tender age of fifteen to *Pir Sain* who was of his father's age, had borne six children, three sons and three daughters. One son was still born. One died as a young man. The three girls were married and she was a grandmother at thirty-three.

The narration of her first night experience with her husband confirms her entry into a hell. She writes, "Stripped naked, I felt a mountain of flesh descend on me... He had commenced our wedding night with an animal haste food and ended it satiated,, Did I sleep that night or was it some kind of death?"(39) The room seemed to her like a slaughterhouse.

Remembering her first beating from her husband Heer says that it was because she did not observe *purdah* from a male who was just six years old. "The bangles splintered and scattered. Sharp shards of glass cut into my wrists."(41) Nothing changed for Heer when she became pregnant for the first time. As she says, "...the risk of violence more frightening and my duties even more unbearable."(52) She was surrounded by the prayers to Allah to grant her a son and six more after that. Heer was a witness several brutalities of her husband but one of her maid, *Kaali's* fate had shattered her. *Kaali* was forcibly married off to an impotent man and then physically abused by several men including the *Pir* pushing her into the hell which resulted into her death.

Heer calls her husband's home a *Jahanum*-which means a hell. She gets shuddered by the story of another *pir* who gave sons to barren mothers only to have them taken away and absorbed into the system of his shrine. She says, "At birth, the child's head was fitted into an iron cage, so that the body grew while the head did not. Because they grew up to look like rats they were called *chuhas* and forced to beg for alms; an army of deformed beggars was bred."(61)

Heer has to pay the price for sympathizing with *Kaali*-her maid, by the death of her unborn child. "He sat on a chair, pulled me down between his legs and gripped my temples with his knees. My eyes bulged out at the ceiling."...The razor ran across my scalp, then back and forth across my brow. Flung across the room,

I saw him coil towards e like torrid lava. Flat on my back. My stomach protruded. Inside it my baby kicked. Over it the father descended.” (71)

This brutality leads to her child's death. Heer had by now seen the evil, brutal, insensitive and frightening faces of those who claimed to be the *Pirs*, the descendants of the Prophet, especially blessed by Allah. The worst part of her life was that her own mother had deliberately closed her eyes towards Heer to give a better life to her other two daughters and a son. Heer knew that her mother had purchased prosperity and happiness for her family by selling Heer to the evil *Pir Sain*.

It is from *Toti*-a ghost, Heer gets to know about *Kaali's* fate. She tells Heer, “A part of the virility serum injected into your husband's horses to ensure a productive mating season was injected into the boys that were let loose upon *Kaali*. The wild beasts scavenged *Kaali's* pregnant body. She could no longer rise from her bed. The only time she did was when she hanged herself.”(96)

Her interactions with the ghost of *Toti* push Heer into another trouble. Despite being a mother of the *Pir's* children she has to face heinous physical abuse. She is kicked, punched and shown the hell in the death chamber-her bedroom. *Toti* was a Baluch woman who was brutally punished for the crime of loving a man who loved her in return.

By the time she was thirty, Heer became a mother of five children- two sons and three daughters. Amongst them Guppi –Heer's eldest daughter was her soul-mate with a questioning mind. Guppi had the courage to question *Amma Sain* why they were forced to read Quran in Arabic when they did not understand the language. She even questioned whether they read Quran for *sawab* or to understand the instructions or directions given by *Allah* to lead a better and a just life.

The worst was yet to come for Heer and it happened when her daughter Guppi turned twelve. The little girl's own father *Pir Sain* had set eyes on her and was dying to make her his prey. One night he takes Guppi to another room. Heer says, “I sensed him turning away and her rising. My eyes opened and leapt behind them, but I was helpless as Ma. They disappeared behind the bedroom door...Guppi screamed.”(110)

The next day Heer asks her daughter what her father had done and she says,

“He put his hand inside my *shalwar*. He also put it in my shirt and pressed me hard...” “Guppi touched her breast.”(111)

Heer's fear for Guppi leads her to do a sin. She offers a young girl of Guppi's age, Yathimiri, to her husband to satiate his lust. She says,

“A wounded baby deer with frightened eyes lay on the floor. Her mouth was stuffed with his handkerchief, her torso was naked, her child-like breasts bore teeth-marks. The rest of her was covered with a sheet... *Oh God, I thought, if it were not she, would have been Guppi?*”(113)

Heer, who was worried about her daughter's security, decides to feed Yathimiri well and make her strong enough to face *Pir Sain's* lust every night. Four out of seven days of her absence every month were spent with Yathimiri by the *Pir*. Thus Heer managed to keep Guppi and her two other daughters safe.

This decision backfires for Heer when Yathimiri becomes an ‘other woman’ and a favourite one in her husband's life, leaving her as a discarded wife. His fondness for Yathimiri leaves Heer in pain as she has to face extremely violent behaviour from him leaving her skull broken and bones crushed. *Amma Sain* advises Heer to lure *Pir Sain* once again towards her so when Heer asks *Amma Sain* that would her son marry Yathimiri, she says, “He can marry whomsoever he pleases. It is his prerogative. The only way to keep him is to become indispensable to him in bed.”(121) Heer always wonders how Yathimiri coped with her husband's satanic lust.

The *Pir Sain* goes beyond all the limits when he makes both Heer and Yathimiri drink alcohol and satiates his lust whole night on both of them on the same bed.

Guppi was to be married off and now it was Heer's responsibility to save her younger daughters from their own father's lusting eyes and she on her husband's persuasion decides to slaughter a needy widow's daughter. She says,

“She was smaller than Diya... Holding her, I was the devil mother.”(128)

Pir Sain's violent behaviour even strikes his own son *Chote Sain* when he starts becoming popular amongst the people for his good deeds and goes ahead of his father in popularity. The *Pir* falsely blames him of raping Yathimiri, who was *Pir's* mistress, and thrashes him almost to death. He remains in coma for two months and when he returns home he is good for nothing.

“Chote Sain was tied with ropes to the rebellious tree. *Khajji* whips slashed his bare back.”(136)

Thus *Pir* murders his own son. The feelings expressed by Heer on her son's death are heart – wrenching. Her hatred towards her husband reaches culmination. She says,

“There were no visible signs of sorrow on his face. Nor did he condole with me. Although, I did not raise my head to look at him. I could have torn his heart out and thrown it to the vultures. I could have torn out his eyes so that he could never see another orphan girl to lust after again.”(143)

Heer's daughters are married off and her loved son *Chote Sain* is murdered by his own father. Now she is left with her husband and her younger son *Rajaji* who is a mirror image of his father *Pir Sain*. The maniac *Pir*

forces Heer to watch porn films. To gain the sympathy of the villagers, the *Pir* decides to marry Yathimiri to an impotent man. Heer becomes the target once again and is left as Heer says,

“He had spent me without replenishing anything. My eyes had become like stagnant swamps sunk in on themselves. My mouth lost its words. My body felt senseless. It seemed like debris had collected in a dirt dump. The flesh would soon shift from my bones, then the skin would shift from the flesh, and yet the master required eternal youth. In the mirror youth was speeding away.”(148)

The story of Heer becomes even more horrific when she is forced to sleep with a stranger by her own husband. A boy of eighteen years of age rapes her. She turns into a whore. She is forced to sleep with different people every night by the *Pir*. Heer's meek character leaves her with no option but to keep herself drugged and drunk to perform everything that her husband says. Heer says,

“Layres of dead skin, calluses and corns, lumps and bumps, jagged elbows, and a lifetime of neglect descended over me. Every pore in my body cringed.... he groped and plucked and clawed... Pir Sain was filming us...”(161)

“I begged and cried to Allah.” (162)

Heer reaches a point where nothing actually bothered her. Heer says that she was forced to sleep with seven varieties of boys. She says,

“When my husband outgrew the boys, he watched their films instead. When they bored him, he brought in the widow's two girls. When he was fed up with the novelty of bedding two sisters, I had to labour for hours to keep him amused When everything failed, Yathimiri succeeded.”(163)

Heer was made a prostitute by her own husband.

Heer's husband was a sexual lecher and was not satisfied with one woman but still he was *Pir* in the eyes of people and was worshipped by them because they were ignorant about his evil nature. He enjoyed a high status in the society being the centre of respect and attention and never suffered on any ground.

Pir Sain dies due to his own sinful ways but he leaves Heer in filth.

This story has a chilling narration of the Heer's journey through hell and the hypocritical ways of the religious saints.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Dr. Bharti Dave Chilling Wails in 'Balsphemey' By Tehmina Durrani.” IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS), vol. 22, no. 11, 2017, pp. 45-48.