

Presenting Her Self : Deconstructing the Politics of Presentation

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Writing is the only avenue of expression for many women in different cultures and societies. It is also a means to stay sane in a society that inflicts all possible tortures on its women at the same time prohibiting them to speak for themselves. In an increasingly insecure world, a woman speaks of conflict, generated, engendered and perpetuated by men. (c.f. *Black Eve in Prison*, x). While nature seems to award brilliance equally to men and women, society does not nurture it equally in the two sexes, and thus leaves the women more discouraged. Nor, in females, does the world approve self expression, which artists are born to make.

Literature is the canvas used by writers to convey their individual purposes. The purpose can take myriad forms, from mirroring the follies and foibles of the society for some, to the outpouring of feelings for others. Yet for others it can be commercial or providing entertainment. Whatever may be the reason, thousands of writers over the millennia have turned to literature as their vehicle of expression. Women however, appeared on the scene, in large numbers, only after the dawn of the twentieth century. This reflects their position in the society. Earlier they were considered incapable of worthy writing on the one hand and lacked freedom of expression on the other. Even in the twenty first century, very recently, Sir Naipaul created a furore by giving the statement that women cannot write good literature. Today women's writing has assumed greater significance and women writers attain the pinnacle of success as they garner fame and glory. However, sometimes they have to face criticism when they try to vent their suppressed desires for subverting the accepted female image.

Man for the field and woman for the hearth;

Man for the sword and for the needle she;

Man with head, and woman with the heart;

Man to command, and woman to obey;

All else confusion.

Tennyson, *The Princess* (lines 427-431).

For women silence and discretion are most becoming.

And also to abide at home in peace.

Euripides, *Children of Hercules*

We hold that whatever is essentially wrong for woman to do, cannot be right for man. If deception and intrigue, the elements of political craft, be degrading to woman, can they be ennobling to man? If patience and forbearance adorn a woman, are they not essential to a manly character? If anger and turbulence disgrace woman, what can they add to the dignity of man?

Elizabeth Jones (qtd in Feminist Quotations)

Quoted above are the two diverse views on women. The man's point of view lays emphasis on his definition of the home as her world and holds her to be pious and pure, fragile and weak, submissive and domestic, passive and unintellectual. The woman's point of view expresses her refusal to conform to the norms laid down by man. She demands equality and individual freedom. She voices her dissent against the double standard of morals practiced in the society. She is not ready to digest her description or presentation by the male writers in the male writing and for the male voyeurism.

In one of her interviews Arundhati Roy said that, "...I was not going to write on 'behalf' of anyone but myself because I think that's the most honest thing to do ... in our society particularly, the politics of 'representation' is complicated and fraught with danger and dishonesty" (N. Ram's Interview with Arundhati Roy).

Any woman who would write the truth about her life (woman's life) would write a great book, for she lives not only one life but myriad lives at a time. She is wife, she is mother, she is beloved, she is sister, she is daughter and she is friend. But seldom has 'she' been treated as an individual. To reclaim her 'self', to establish her 'I' some authors came on the fore and Tehmina Durrani is one of the prominent one amongst them. Rewriting the self through suffering and memory is women's lot everywhere. In a 1986 interview Toni Morrison explained that she came to writing fiction because she felt that "There were no books about me, I didn't exist in all the literature I had read ...this person this female, this black did not exist..." so she stepped in to fill the vacancy, to claim the 'I' (Jill L. Matus).

"Words for me are just balm — they sooth me when the anguish is too deep" — says the Lahore based writer Feryal Ali Gauher. But even this self-curative and self-protective act can earn censor or *fatwa* as in the case of Taslima Nasreen. Being a woman is like being an Irish. Everyone says you are important and nice but you take the second place all the same. The injunction of St. Paul is that "I permit no woman to speak...she is to keep silent".

Recent developments in feminist theory confirm beyond doubt that consciousness is grounded in one's personal history and that one's identity is constantly being reconstructed within the horizon of meaning and knowledge available in one's culture at given historical moments. Consciousness therefore is never fixed, never attained once for all, because discursive boundaries change with historical conditions.

Non-white women, in the Euro-Centric consciousness have always been the Other. This Otherization has produced a consciousness of the need for identification and solidarity. A new model of political identity, one which forges a theoretical voice privileging otherness, differences and specificity has emerged. By positioning themselves as Aboriginal, Black, South Asian, Chinese or Japanese Canadians, by writing from the specificity of their community's experiences, they have called into question the universal feminist stance adopted by white feminist writers.

Differences of race, class and sexuality transform women's experiences of oppression. The term 'women of color' is thus a heavily loaded one. It was embraced as an emancipator strategy and theoretical site in which to locate the struggle for self-

representation. The speaking subject appropriates experience, language, history and sexuality to counter Anglo-European imperialistic designs.

The term has become interchangeable with “Third World Women” since both attempt to express political coalition organized around specific sets of exploitative structures and their relationships. Since the 1980s the term has entered the mainstream of public and official discourse.

In Barbara Smith’s word, “Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: Women of color, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women” (27). Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely female self-aggrandizement. This shift from the singular to the plural from woman to women, from feminism to feminisms has resulted in the acceptance that the women’s movement is not monolithic or static. We cannot deny the differences that exist between different schools of feminisms and the role that class and race play in our life experiences, perceptions and methodologies.

It is to fight the politics of ‘representation’ and dispel the dishonesty of that ‘representation’ that female writers chose to speak in their own language, and stepped into the supposedly male bastion of writing. This paper tries to trace one such voice which when heard created a furore in the world of patriarchy. And this voice is that of Tehmina Durrani, one of the most leading voices in Pakistan’s women literature. She has articulated her ‘self in suffering’ and also what it is to be a woman in Pakistan’s feudal society.

Come what may, I will continue my fight for equality and justice without any compromise until my death. Come what may, I will never be silenced (Taslima Nasrin).

Free speech is like rape in India. Politicians and intellectuals don’t defend everyone’s free speech like they don’t condemn every rape (Taslima Nasrin, Times of India, April, 2014).

The real oppression on women is that they must not speak. And doing something as unconventional as writing a book, makes you into a woman who can expose herself, a woman who doesn’t have modesty (Tehmina Durrani, in an interview by Sahar Ali).

Fatima Bhutto, one of the most well known personalities of Pakistan, while promoting her debut fiction *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* has very recently said that: “Having grown up in South Asia, I have watched how women are treated and how much violence is inflicted on them...Everywhere one goes or observes, women are sufferers—and the struggle doesn’t seem to be ever over...I always say that women are humanists...” About her fiction she says that though the book was originally about three men but “the women just took over. They break stereotypes of the image of Pakistani women and chronicle the sufferings they are put through by fundamentalists, the state, society and their men.” And further, she says, “As a writer, i’ll continue to do as I please to do and speak on behalf of what i feel is my inner voice through my stories—there, nobody can say what to say or what to curb” (Interview by Arnab Banerjee, Times of India, December 23, 2013).

Going through her interview one can notice one common finding amongst almost all the women writers across the globe, and that is, because society (patriarchy?) does not allow them to speak what they want to and the way they would like to, they chose the realm of writing to have their own flight and flow – uncurbed, uncensored, unbridled. It is not that they are not spoken for, not represented by society, but it was always mixed with myth more than reality. The representation is not what and how they are but rather what and how they ought to be. One can say, that, more than representation or description; it is the kind of prescription everywhere that women ultimately chose not to endure anymore if they want to maintain their sanity.

Tehmina Durrani (born 18 February 1953) is the daughter of a former Governor of State Bank of Pakistan and Managing Director of Pakistan International Airlines, S.U. Durrani and a granddaughter of Nawab Sir Liaqat Hayat Khan, prime minister of Patiala state for eleven years. Her first book, *My Feudal Lord*, caused ripples in Pakistan's male-dominated society by describing her abusive and traumatic marriage to Ghulam Mustafa Khar, then Chief Minister and later Governor of Punjab and her experience of a feudal society. She is currently involved in the emancipation of women in Pakistan.

Durrani earned the reputation of being a bold, feminist writer. "Well, I'm a woman, so I naturally write from a feminine perspective," she reasons. "More than that, I'm interested in reform. My work, whether it's *My Feudal Lord* or *Blasphemy*, or Abdus Sattar Edhi's narrated autobiography, *Mirror To The Blind*, is about issues that concern our people, about breaking a silence for a part of society which cannot speak out. I am called bold because these are issues one does not talk about, nor does one talk about one's own life. I suppose my passion for reform is overwhelming. And, I think, when anything overwhelms you that much, you have a natural boldness because you step out of the realm of fear" (Sahar Ali). For 13 years, she lived that fear, as the battered sixth wife of a feudal landlord from the Punjab.

Though Durrani did eventually leave Khar, she wasn't 'running away'. In fact, she chose to do the most difficult thing – write an expose of her marriage as a way of showing feudalism in its true light. The book narrates how Khar physically beat Durrani, kidnapped their children, had a heart breaking affair with her sibling, and even forced her to strip naked, when she disobeyed his orders. She argued in the book that the real power of feudal landlords like Khar is derived from the distorted version of Islam that is supported by the silence of women and society as a whole. 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 voices against injustice.

In her authorial note of the book she writes, "When I decided to write this book, I was aware of the perils of exposing the details of my private life to a male-dominated society. But I had to cast aside my personal considerations in favour of the greater good..." She has dedicated her book "To the five other ex-wives of Mustafa Khar, who have silently suffered pain and dishonor while he walked away with impunity." As his sixth wife, she holds him accountable for all that he has done. (Durrani *My Feudal Lord*)

Tehmina says that the “a man was the only future available to a Pakistani girl...and that a broken marriage was a reflection of a woman’s failure” (28-29). She herself had fallen a prey into the classic trap of the Pakistani woman. “The goal is marriage and, once achieved, the future is a life of total subordination. I had no power, no rights, no will of my own” (100). To think independently was a crime...and the role of the wife was...to live her life according to her husband’s whims” (107).

Social acceptability is insufficient reason to maintain a marriage that has rotted away for a woman but patriarchy would like to maintain that pseudo appearance just for the sake of society. For example, in *Anna Karenina* (Leo Tolstoy’s world famous novel) when Anna, its central protagonist, is having an extra-marital relationship with Vronsky she is ready to divorce her husband Karenin immediately but Karenin says that for the sake of society try to preserve our marriage.

Sitting alone I ...conjectured that fate had placed me on this tortuous path for a purpose. Our closed society considered it obscene for a woman to reveal her intimate secretes, but would not silence be a greater crime?...I decided to caste a stone at hypocrisy. I decided to write this book and break the traditional silence (*My Feudal Lord*).

But for breaking the silence Tehmina had to pay a big price. Her father gave written notice to the press disowning and disinheriting her. And Tehmina accepted that disinheritance in a press release stating that it is the natural outcome of unconventional behaviour. Such isolation is the cause of a woman’s silence in our society.

Mr. Durrani, father of Tehmina walked out of his marriage at the age of sixty and married another woman. Why? He explains to Tehmina, as for the reason that, “my mother had cramped his personality. He said that life with her had been a continuous masquerade for him. With a sardonic smile he proclaimed that his new wife accepted him for who he was...” (332). And the daughter, a woman understands the simplicity of his words realizing that he is going through a late-life crisis. But still she thinks that it is irresponsible of him, now that he had raised his own family and had eighteen grandchildren, suddenly to take a second wife. But the father was unmoved by her sentiments. And he vehemently argues, “You want me to spend the last few years of my life living a lie for the sake of an image. My life has at last become important to me. I have reacted only once in sixty years, you know” (333). A father can understand the importance of his own life, being a male, but he is not ready to think the same for his daughter, because she is a woman? Is the same step taken by her is so drastic that he has to disown her publically? The answer is no. But the thing is that a man cannot tolerate the same freedom enjoyed by a woman as he is enjoying whether that woman is his own daughter.

My feudal lord is one of the extraordinary autobiographies. Tehmina Durrani uses it as a means of exposing the hypocrisy of ruling elites of Pakistan generally and the cruel nature of her husband specifically. She started writing this book just after the few months of divorce. In this book, she talks about the social ethics of Pakistani marital life which is different for man and woman by citing her own marriage as an example.

She divided the devastating account of her marriage into three parts – Lion of Punjab (Mustafa who roars and destroys the lives of simple and innocent women without any hesitation), Law of Jungle and the Lioness.

Before marrying Mustafa, Tehmina was also married but she leaves behind her husband ‘innocent and simple guy’ and marries Mustafa. But soon she starts realizing hollowness and barrenness of this relationship. She states in the novel that “I had no power, no rights, and no will of my own”.

Law of jungle starts with Tehmina and Mustafa’s immigration to London; there his affair with her youngest sister makes her mad and panic. She endures all her husband’s physical assaults and sexual brutality as part of her destiny. But then she decides to rebel the king – “I am not your sister or your mother, I am your wife”. This is how Tehmina challenges the patriarchal structure denying all the roles of women as futile and abstract. But Mustafa can never allow her to leave him because he thinks that she is the only skylark that can amuse him while he is tired.

As lioness, Tehmina campaigns for Mustafa and he wins the elections. But a Lion is a lion at every cost. His violence becomes more intense. Finally she decides to burst out all her pains in the form of book and an act of writing for woman is to break the silence that patriarchal society has culturally imposed upon her.

Durrani has shown in an undaunted way that every woman has her identity and individuality. Her so-called roles are nothing but cultural constructs and a woman has the power to challenge the whole patriarchy even at the cost of her closest relatives.

The five basic tenets of Islam continue onto the sixth for me – Huquq-ul-Ibad, or humanitarianism. That is not proclaimed as obligatory, has deeper meaning, as right or wrong are left to human initiatives, its importance would be lost if forced. (Tehmina Durrani, *Edhi: A Mirror to The Blind*). Perhaps Tehmina wants to proclaim that humanitarianism by the sheer power of evoking her suffering through her writing and also to dispel the politics which has enclosed woman in a vicious circle not allowing her or rather forbidding her to speak for herself. Prophet Muhammad. (P) said: The best of you is the best to his family and I am the best among you to my family. The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and best of you are those who are best to their wives. (Ibn-Hanbal, No. 7396). When the continuation of the marriage relationship is impossible for any reason, men are still taught to seek a gracious end for it.

The Qur’an states about such cases: When you divorce women, and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and retain them not for injury so that you transgress (the limits). (Qur’an 2:231). (See also Qur’an 2:229 and 33:49). “It is the generous (in character) who is good to women, and it is the wicked who insults them”. But Durrani’s violent marriage to Khar stands as a testimonial to how the Qur’anic words are nothing for a male if he wants it to be so.

Tehmina admits that, what religion says and what a man practices can create a hell out of heaven, especially for a woman. The same religion can have different practices (not theory) for both male and female. Till date woman can be stoned to

death for making her own choice in the matter of love and marriage in Pakistan or even worse acid-attacked to give her prolong death.

When Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* was published, it created a sensation in the closed society of Pakistan. She was threatened with dire consequences but she was keen to shock the society into thinking, and agreeing to a great extent, that women are not less intelligent than men but are only fundamentally different with a higher threshold of pain.

In Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Sun* one of the female protagonists Nana says or rather admonishes her daughter Miriam about the reality of living in a world meant for man. "Learn this now and learn it well, well my daughter: Like the compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that Miriam" (*A Thousand Splendid Sun*, 7).

The voices of patriarchy function as the established voice of the society that is unquestionable and dictate the lives of women. Such voices are rampant in the writing by male writers. Even in the religious, mythical terms, the dominant feminine prototype is the chaste, patient, self-denying woman in whatever role she plays—a daughter, sister, mother, or wife. When looking at these narratives silence/ speech can be a useful guide to interpreting women's responses to patriarchal hegemony. Silence is a symbol of oppression, a characteristic of the subaltern condition, while speech signifies self-expression and liberation.

The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayal of enduring, self-sacrificing women toward conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to earlier novels, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood. Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. The novels emerging in the twenty-first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure as the key-elements of the patriarchal social organization. They also reinterpret mythology by using a new symbols and subverting the canonic versions. In conclusion, the work of female writers is significant in making society aware of women's demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression.

It is interesting to note that though culture/religion/society prohibits the articulation of women yet through taped messages (*Offred-Hand Maid's Tale*) letters (*Celie-The color Purple*) dairies (*Monisha-Voices of the City*) autobiographies (*Durrani-My Feudal Lord*) and various other means, women make sure that their voice is heard. Margerate Atwood, Alice Walker, Anita Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa, Tehmina Durrani and others have dared to portray the women who refuse to be silenced by the dominant culture and portray their lives as lived. By tapping into the conversation of their texts, we can understand what these women are saying to the world and especially to themselves.

If we allow these women to converse together they will be surprised to learn that for them the boundaries of class, culture, country or religion are meaningless; that they are sculpted from the same clay; meant for the same furnace-the furnace called patriarchy. But they have tried to break the silence, as Tehmina writes, silence condones injustice. Now women like her are no longer ready for further submission and suppression, to accept the dictate of patriarchy. They are very much willing to re write their selves, in the language of their own, with the help of their suffering self. It is an attempt to overcome and break the politics of presentation, without which their lives would become tremendous chaos and the reality of their selves would eternally remain lost.

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