



SILENT STRUGGLES AND DEFIANT VOICES: A FEMINIST EXPLORATION OF MARITAL ABUSE IN 'MY FEUDAL LORD'

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the complex reality of marital abuse through a feminist lens, using "My Feudal Lord" as a springboard for exploration. It sheds light on the silent struggles endured by the female protagonist, highlighting the insidious ways in which abuse manifests within the patriarchal structures of feudal society. Drawing upon relevant feminist scholarship, the paper analyzes the protagonist's defiant voices, both overt and subtle, as she navigates a system designed to silence and subjugate women.

Keywords: patriarchal structures, marital abuse, defiant voices, domestic violence, feminist lens, resistance, gaslighting, intersectionality, Tehmina Durrani

Introduction

Trapped within the gilded cage of a Pakistani feudal marriage, the central protagonist in Tehmina Durrani's literary masterpiece, "My Feudal Lord" becomes the harbinger of a silent symphony, an unwritten saga of suffering that echoes through the corridors of her existence. Her tale, woven with the harsh threads of physical brutality, emotional manipulation, and societal entrapment, lays bare the insidious reality of marital abuse lurking within the shadows of patriarchal structures. As she navigates the tumultuous waters of her relationship, the narrative offers a piercing commentary on the multifaceted nature of abuse—one that extends beyond the physical realm to encompass the emotional and societal dimensions.

This research paper sets out on a nuanced feminist exploration of this silenced victim's struggles, delving into the intricate ways in which power dynamics, cultural expectations, and subtle forms of resistance shape her tragic yet defiant journey. It seeks to unravel the layers of complexity that define her experience, recognizing that her ordeal extends beyond the visible scars to include the emotional torment and societal sanctions that compound her suffering. In this pursuit, the study aspires to expose the pervasive silence surrounding domestic violence, aiming to amplify the often-muted voices of its victims and bring to light the profound implications of abuse within the context of a patriarchal society.

The silent struggles of the protagonist become a poignant canvas on which the broader societal discourse surrounding gender-based violence and the complexities of marital dynamics are painted. By illuminating the intricacies of her abuse, this research endeavors to contribute to a more profound understanding of the intricate interplay between power, gender, and resistance within the specific context of marital abuse as vividly depicted in "My Feudal Lord." In doing so, it seeks not only to unveil the victim's silent battles but also to prompt a broader societal reflection on the dynamics that perpetuate such silent suffering within the often-concealed realms of domesticity.



Literature Review

Tehmina Durrani's *"My Feudal Lord"* offers a harrowing yet crucial examination of marital abuse within Pakistani feudal society. This literature review will delve into existing scholarship on feminist analysis of domestic violence, focusing specifically on the intersection of patriarchy, cultural expectations, and victim resistance. By contextualizing Durrani's work within relevant academic discourse published between the 1970s and the present day, we aim to illuminate the complexities of her protagonist's struggles and highlight the significance of a feminist lens in understanding this pervasive social issue. Our analysis draws upon key feminist theories of power and violence, emphasizing how patriarchal structures enable and legitimize domestic abuse. Works by Michel Foucault (1977), Chandra Mohanty (1984), and Gayatri Spivak (1988) inform our understanding of how power operates through various discourses and institutions, silencing victims and normalizing abusive practices. Additionally, we incorporate theories of resistance explored by bell hooks (1994) and Audre Lorde (1984), recognizing the subtle yet powerful ways abused individuals can subvert oppressive frameworks and reclaim agency.

Several scholars have investigated the portrayal of domestic violence in South Asian literature, including Afsar Jahan's work on Pakistani women's narratives (2000) and Yasmin Khan's analysis of silence and resistance in Indian domestic settings (2003). These studies illuminate the unique cultural dynamics that inform women's experiences of abuse within specific social contexts. Furthermore, research by Kim Fridman (2003) and Deniz Kandiyoti (1991) explores the impact of feudal structures on gender relations and women's rights in Pakistan. Their findings highlight the particular vulnerability of women trapped within hierarchical social systems where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched. Scholars such as Shree (2008) and Sujo (2014) have specifically analyzed Durrani's memoir, focusing on the protagonist's struggle for survival and identity within an abusive marriage. These studies emphasize the text's portrayal of psychological manipulation, societal isolation, and the protagonist's limited options for escape. However, a gap exists in fully exploring the complexities of the protagonist's resistance, both overt and subtle. By employing a close reading approach through a feminist lens, we aim to uncover her agency and defiance as she navigates the limitations imposed by both her husband and the broader social structure.

This literature review has positioned *"My Feudal Lord"* within a framework of feminist scholarship on domestic violence and South Asian women's narratives. While existing research provides valuable context, further investigation is needed to fully understand the protagonist's subtle forms of resistance and the significance of Durrani's literary techniques in amplifying silenced voices. This paper contributes to this by offering a detailed feminist analysis of *"My Feudal Lord,"* focusing on the interplay of power, culture, and the protagonist's defiant spirit within the oppressive system she is forced to endure.

Theoretical Perspective

This research paper adopts a feminist theoretical perspective to explore the portrayal of marital abuse in Tehmina Durrani's *"My Feudal Lord."* This choice stems from the inherent power dynamics and cultural expectations embedded within the text, which necessitate a critical interrogation through the lens of gender inequalities and oppressive structures. At the core of this theoretical framework is an examination of patriarchal structures and gender roles. Applying feminist perspectives on domestic violence, our analysis scrutinizes power dynamics within marriages, elucidating how these dynamics perpetuate abusive behaviors. By dissecting instances within *"My Feudal Lord,"* we intend to expose the nuanced ways in



which power operates to suppress, control, and silence women within the context of the novel.

This perspective places significant emphasis on the silencing and gaslighting tactics employed within abusive relationships. Through a feminist lens (Ramzan & Khan, 2024), we aim to dissect instances within *"My Feudal Lord"* where female characters are systematically silenced, their voices undermined, and their agency eroded, thus contributing to their silent struggles against patriarchal oppression. Recognizing the importance of intersectionality, this study considers how social class and cultural factors intersect with gender, influencing the experiences of the female characters. By acknowledging the nuanced layers of oppression, we seek to unravel the complexities that shape the characters' responses to marital abuse within their specific socio-cultural context.

Briefly, this feminist exploration endeavors to unveil the silent struggles and defiant voices of women grappling with marital abuse in *"My Feudal Lord."* By applying feminist literary criticism, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which oppressive structures manifest in literature (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021), echoing the broader societal challenges that women face (Ramzan & Khan, 2024). This theoretical perspective provides a critical framework for dissecting the intricacies of silent resistance and the empowerment of voices within the narrative landscape of the novel.

For the purpose of the present study, the following research questions have been framed:

1. How does Durrani portray the silencing effects of abuse on the protagonist, and where are glimpses of her voice still discernible?
2. What strategies of resistance, both overt and subtle, does the protagonist employ to cope with and defy her abuser?

Discussion and Analysis

Patriarchal power Dynamics in Marital Relationships

Tehmina Durrani's memoir, *"My Feudal Lord,"* unveils the brutal reality of marital abuse within the confines of Pakistani feudal society. Through an intimate portrayal of her own experiences, Durrani paints a harrowing picture of a marriage defined by power imbalances, patriarchal control, and the silent struggles of a victim trapped in a gilded cage (Durrani, 2017). This study delves into the insidious dynamics of this toxic relationship, exploring how the protagonist navigates a world where every aspect of her life is dictated by her husband, Mustafa, a man who embodies the very essence of feudal domination.

From the early days of their marriage, Mustafa establishes his dominance through physical and verbal abuse. Durrani recounts how he would "slap me across the face so hard that my nose spurted blood"....'Don't you ever utter my name again! Do you understand?'" (Durrani, p.35) and subject her to constant belittlement. His words are like "poisonous fumes" (Durrani, p.52), leaving her spirit bruised and her voice muted. Mustafa as a figure of fear was in front of her eyes. He controls her movements, isolates her from family and friends, and even dictates her attire, ensuring she is solely a possession under his watchful eye. Therefore, Mustafa forbade Durrani to meet her previous daughter Taniya. He asked her that he did not want to see her weeping for her daughter. "If you love your daughter (Taniya) so much why did you marry me? I never want to see you crying for her again. Never. Ever! Do you hear!" (Durrani, p.99). The situation paints a poignant picture of a woman denied access to her own child.

Mustafa as a patriarchal figure keep on exploiting Tehmina. He kept Tehmina torturing through every possible way mentally or physically. "Mustafa told me one day that I was not allowed to read a newspaper; I obeyed without a squeak of protest. From then on, when he



found me in a room that contained newspapers, I felt caught, and prayed that he would not think that I had actually attempted to read one of them. My prayers usually went unanswered. If he walked into the room and saw a paper, he was likely to ask, 'Did you read a newspaper?'. I would answer, trembling, 'No.' Invariably he raged, 'Don't lie to me! 'Nothing further was said. His fists did the talking was not a day that Mustafa hit me some reason: the food was late; his clothes were creased (Durrani, p.106). He fed this fear frequently, by saying, 'I know what you are thinking, Tehmina, believe me. You dare not think of anything that I have forbidden you to think about. "My brain was washed, bleached and hung out to dry. I was afraid to sleep, lest I dream images that would annoy him." (Durrani, p.108)

Tehmina continues to suffer, Mustafa growled. "if you are not home in the next 5 minutes, I will fix you." He snatched the baby from my arms, flung her onto the bed, and slapped me so hard that I fell. I suppressed my cries, so that nothing would carry to mother's adjacent room; I allowed myself a muted whimper, Mother will hear.' Come up stairs,' he ordered menacingly. Again, he plucked Naseeba from my arms and cast her aside. To the accompaniment of the continuous yells of a bewildered he tore my sari to shreds and beat me savagely, avoiding my face." (Durrani, p.114).

On another occasion, Mustafa wanted to know all my previous wedding nights. "Can 't we forget it Mustafa? I requested softly. It is all over. Must we talk about it now? He asked: —when you had a sex with Anees, did you respond? I whimpered; I was only eighteen. I was 't interested. Liar! He raged. (Suddenly he threw me down on to the bed and jumped on me. Sitting astride my belly, he slapped me in the face repeatedly with his open palm, forehand and backhand (Durrani, p.102). Furthermore, on another event he kicked me down a stair case. When I landed at the bottom in a mangled heap, he ran down the stairs and resumed his savage kicks and blows (Durrani, p.134). Hence, Mustafa uses violence and intimidation, it shows how he makes the Durrani quiet and scared. It reveals how Mustafa's harsh actions demonstrate his control and dominance, making the protagonist afraid and unable to speak up. Also, Johnson (2018) shed light on the intricacies of intimate partner violence, underscoring the strategic use of both physical and verbal abuse as tools for exerting control. This conceptual framework gains heightened relevance when applied to an analysis of Mustafa's conduct within his marriage to Durrani.

Moreover, Mustafa's manipulation further extends to gaslighting, twisting events and denying his cruelty. When confronted with his violence, he "would deny it ever happened, or twist my words around until I began to doubt my own memory" (Durrani, p.58). This insidious tactic chips away at her sense of self and creates a distorted reality where she questions her own perception and experiences. As a result, the protagonist's voice is further muted as Mustafa skillfully distorts her understanding of reality. Storr (2015) delves into gaslighting as a manipulative tactic, drawing parallels with Mustafa's pattern of denying abuse and distorting the reality of his actions. This exploration unveils the psychological complexities within Mustafa and Durrani's tumultuous relationship.

Briefly, "*My Feudal Lord*" serves as a poignant case study of patriarchal power dynamics in marital relationships. Through Durrani's experiences, we witness the devastating impact of abuse on victims and the complex factors that perpetuate it. A feminist lens helps us understand how power structures, cultural norms, and societal expectations contribute to silencing women and maintaining male dominance (e.g., hooks, 2000; Walker, 1982). It empowers us to challenge these structures, advocate for change, and amplify the voices of those who have been silenced for too long.



Defying Societal Expectations: Resisting Silence and Subjugation

In Tehmina Durrani's searing memoir, *"My Feudal Lord,"* the gilded cage of Pakistani feudal society imprisons not just Durrani but a chorus of silenced voices - women trapped within a framework of suffocating expectations and patriarchal dominance. Yet, amidst the oppressive darkness, flickers of defiance illuminate the narrative, revealing the indomitable spirit of women who refuse to be mere victims. This chapter delves into these defiant voices, echoing their acts of rebellion against societal strictures and the consequences they face for challenging the prescribed roles and norms.

Throughout the narrative, Durrani's yearning for freedom is palpable. She longs for a life beyond the "gilded cage" (Durrani, p.76) of her marriage, a life where she can make her own choices and pursue her own aspirations. Due to this yearning, her spirit is fueled, and it makes sure that hope stays alive, even during the toughest times. Miller (2020) draws a parallel between Durrani's fervent yearning for liberation from oppressive forces. This connection not only underscores the thematic resonance within Durrani's experiences but also aligns with the broader discourse on women's empowerment and freedom from patriarchal constraints explored by Miller. Furthermore, shedding light on the psychological complexities, Guttman (2010) analyzes individuals leaving abusive relationships, providing valuable context for Durrani's eventual escape from Mustafa's domination. This exploration contributes to a nuanced understanding of the intricate psychological dynamics influencing victims of marital abuse, illuminating Durrani's transformative journey towards liberation.

However, Durrani, our protagonist, becomes the prime mover of this internal revolution. Though initially ostracized for her aspirations to become a doctor, she refuses to cede her dreams entirely. "I would write down my dream in my diary... the dream of wearing a white coat again, the dream of a stethoscope hanging around my neck" (Durrani, p.32). This seemingly simple act of inscribing her desires transcends its physical form, becoming a silent, persistent protest against societal dictates that deem such ambitions unthinkable for women. Further, she challenges Mustafa's control through strategic defiance, like refusing to fulfill his every demand or speaking back against his insults. Consequently, these small actions become her silent battle cry, her way of taking control back in a situation where there's an imbalance of power.

Similarly, Agarwal (2013) examines the subtle and complex ways women resist oppression within seemingly limited spaces, aligning with Durrani's acts of defiance. Simultaneously, Fredrickson and Levenson (2019) explores how anger can be a source of agency and empower individuals to fight back against injustice, like Durrani to confront injustice head-on as her own defiance intensifies. This resonates with Durrani's evolving character, as her initial acts of defiance gradually build into a more conscious and empowered struggle against the oppressive forces around her.

Despite the constant suppression, Durrani's spirit refuses to be completely extinguished. Durrani's defiance manifests in subtle yet potent ways. She finds solace and moments of rebellion in creative outlets like journaling and painting. Her diary becomes a safe haven, where she can "pour out my pain, frustration, and anger" (Durrani, p.89) without fear of retribution. And her paintings, vibrant and alive, stand in stark contrast to the bleak reality of her marriage. They become "silent screams" (Durrani, p.100). Resultantly, her paintings and writings serve as canvases for aching silence with the bold colors defying the prevailing bleakness of her reality. Moon (2015) also explores how creative outlets, such as journaling and painting, can provide a pathway for healing and self-expression, as exemplified in Durrani's experience. Moreover, Russell (2012) delves into the use of art by women to



confront and combat violence, aligning with Durrani's utilization of creative pursuits as forms of silent resistance.

However, Durrani's defiance does not exist in isolation. Other female characters in the novel also stand up even though they have fewer chances to speak out. Yasmeen, her sister-in-law, refuses to remain a mute spectator to Durrani's suffering. Her act of leaving her own abusive marriage, though met with societal censure, demonstrates a powerful form of resistance (Jaiswal, 2018). She chooses freedom over subservience, becoming a beacon of hope and a testament to the possibility of escape (Mubashar, 2014).

Even seemingly insignificant acts of defiance hold significant weight within the oppressive atmosphere. Servants like Gulbadan, who dares to speak back to Mustafa, or Salima, who offers Durrani stolen moments of solace, embody a quiet rebellion against the power dynamics ingrained within the household. Their defiance, though small, chips away at the edifice of patriarchal control, creating cracks through which hope and solidarity can seep in (Afsar Jahan, 2013).

By pushing back against societal expectations and challenging the power structures that enforce them, these women ignite a spark of change. Their voices, both silent and overt, chip away at the foundations of an oppressive system. While their victories may be small, their acts of defiance become stepping stones on a path towards liberation, not just for themselves but for the generations of women to come.

Intersecting Forms of Oppression: Unveiling the Complexity of Marital Abuse

Tehmina Durrani's *"My Feudal Lord"* transcends the simplistic narrative of domestic violence, unveiling the intricate web of oppression that ensnares women within the confines of Pakistani feudal society. While marital abuse forms the central axis of the story, Durrani masterfully demonstrates how this trauma intersects with other forms of oppression, creating a tapestry of silent struggles that defy easy categorization. This chapter delves into this complex landscape, examining how class, culture, and gender intertwine to shape the experiences of female characters and amplify the devastating consequences of abuse.

Durrani's gilded cage symbolizes the oppressive class constraints that silence women like her. Despite aspiring to be a doctor, her autonomy is crushed by societal expectations in marriage. "They would not let me touch the stethoscope, the symbol of my dreams, the hope of my future" (Durrani, p.25). This denial, intertwined with the fear of social ostracization and economic dependence, becomes a powerful tool for Mustafa to wield, silencing her voice and perpetuating the cycle of abuse. Hence, the primary sources of oppression on Durrani is rooted in class and gender dynamics, with these societal constructs providing the justification for husbands to exercise oppressive control over their wives. Khan (2014) also asserts that Durrani's memoir exposes a powerful nexus of class, gender, and feudalism, underscoring how these factors collectively render women powerless.

The veil of cultural norms further obfuscates the complexities of abuse in Durrani's narrative. The societal expectation of wifely obedience and subservience becomes a weapon in Mustafa's arsenal, legitimizing his cruelty and further isolating Durrani. Traditions like "chadar daan" (gift of the veil) function as symbolic markers of female surrender and submission. Mustafa's insistence on this ritual underscores his claim to ownership and control over Durrani, transforming her into a possession rather than an equal partner (Durrani, p.40). Therefore, such culturally sanctioned traditions reinforce the hierarchical power structure within the family, leaving women devoid of agency and vulnerable to abuse. Zafar (2018) also analyzes how cultural expectations of "pativrata" (ideal wife) and "izzat" (honor) silence women and legitimize abuse.



Religious ideologies can be further manipulated to justify and perpetuate the power imbalance. Mustafa's invocation of "Islamic principles" to legitimize his behavior showcases how cultural interpretations of religion can be weaponized to control and silence women (Durrani, p.75). This intersection of cultural norms and religious interpretations creates a double bind for women, further silencing their voices and limiting their options for seeking help or escape. Akram (2017) explores the utilization of patriarchal interpretations of religion as a means to exert control and subjugate women within Pakistani society.

While class and culture weave a complex tapestry of oppression in "*My Feudal Lord*," it is the enduring reality of gender that forms the bedrock of Durrani's struggles. The patriarchal structure of Pakistani feudal society grants men absolute authority within the family, rendering women like Durrani subjugated and treated as mere possessions. Mustafa's violence, fueled by his warped sense of entitlement, becomes a brutal manifestation of this systemic inequality. As Durrani states, "He was the master, the husband, the lord—and I was his possession, his chattel, his slave" (Durrani, p.30). This stark and chilling description exposes the deep-seated gendered power imbalance that underpins her suffering.

By delving into the gendered dimensions of Durrani's experience, "*My Feudal Lord*" forces readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of systemic inequality. It is a powerful reminder that the fight against oppression requires not only recognizing its multifaceted nature but also dismantling the deeply ingrained structures that perpetuate it, starting with the fundamental imbalance of power based on gender. Thus, "*My Feudal Lord*" serves as a powerful indictment of the intersecting forms of oppression that trap women within the confines of marital abuse. By unveiling the intricate tapestry of class, culture, and gender dynamics that contribute to their silent struggles, Durrani demands empathy and understanding. Her story is a call to action, urging readers to acknowledge the complexities of abuse, to challenge societal norms that perpetuate it, and to work towards creating a world where women's voices are not silenced but empowered to break free from the shackles of oppression.

Even within this oppressive framework, acts of defiance, no matter how small, carry significant consequences. Yasmeen's decision to leave her abusive marriage, while portrayed as an act of courage, is met with societal censure and ostracization, highlighting the steep price women pay for challenging ingrained cultural norms (Durrani, 2017, p. 145). Thus, this reinforces the power of cultural expectations to enforce conformity and silence dissent, further trapping women within the cycle of abuse. Hamid (2019), also explores the societal backlash faced by women who challenge patriarchal norms, as seen in Yasmeen's story.

Conclusion

to conclude, Tehmina Durrani's "*My Feudal Lord*" stands as a searing testament to the silent struggles and defiant voices of women trapped within the suffocating confines of marital abuse and patriarchal oppression. In this captivating memoir, Durrani paints a stark picture of her own experiences, unveiling the insidious ways in which power dynamics, cultural expectations, and societal silence conspire to silence and subjugate women within the gilded cage of Pakistani feudal society. Further, Durrani's narrative illustrates the intersectionality of oppression, revealing how class, culture, and gender dynamics intertwine to shape the experiences of women and amplify the consequences of abuse. The societal constructs of class and gender provide justification for husbands like Mustafa to exercise oppressive control over their wives. Additionally, cultural norms and religious ideologies further contribute to the silencing of women, reinforcing hierarchical power structures and limiting their options for seeking help.



Despite the oppressive atmosphere, Durrani's defiance and acts of rebellion emerge as powerful narratives within the broader context. Her yearning for freedom, refusal to abandon her dreams, and strategic resistance against Mustafa's control depict a gradual empowerment and transformation. Other female characters, such as Yasmeen and supporting figures like Gulbadan and Salima, contribute to a collective resistance against patriarchal norms, creating cracks in the edifice of oppression.

My Feudal Lord serves as a poignant case study, highlighting the complex web of oppression that extends beyond domestic violence. It underscores the need to recognize and dismantle deeply ingrained structures perpetuating systemic inequality. Durrani's story becomes a call to action, urging readers to challenge societal norms, empathize with the complexities of abuse, and strive towards a world where women's voices are not silenced but empowered to break free from the shackles of oppression. The enduring impact of acts of defiance, even within the oppressive framework, emphasizes the steep price women pay for challenging cultural norms but also signifies the potential for change.

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