

Emergence of Women as Vehicles of Change in Selected Works of Tehmina Durrani, Taslima Nasrin and Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract: Works of Tehmina Durrani, Taslima Nasrin and Shashi Deshpande reflect the place of Women in the Post – Colonial period, the contribution of women to stand up to the repressive Cultural set-up and to alter the social milieu by their progressive efforts to find their rightful place in society. Societies portrayed in Tehmina's *My Feudal Lord* and *Blasphemy*, Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and *The Binding Vine* and Nasrin's *Lajja*, prescribe traditional and well – defined roles for women. All the said novels peep into the societal forces responsible for the marginalization of women in South Asian societies. Deshpande focuses on the lives of middle class Indian women striving to negotiate with a highly repressive patriarchal society. Tehmina concerns herself with the miserable conditions of upper class women in a repressive Muslim set-up which treats women like slaves and violence against women is a way of life. Nasrin's *Lajja* speaks of the dehumanization of women in a society hijacked and manipulated by Muslim fanatics. Whatever the scenario, all the three women novelists agree that women are the worst sufferers.

The paper makes an attempt to decipher whether women in the said works evolve and reconstruct themselves vis-à-vis the challenges they encounter in finding their just place in the patriarchal set-up that is almost similar in South Asian societies. The texts reflect that women ultimately come to the realization that they just deteriorate and erase their identity in accommodating and adhering to the unjust demands and expectations of their spouses and the family. Marriage, considered to be a sacred institution, spells doom for women. They find themselves trapped, suffocated, degraded and dehumanized. Then they rebel, stand up and take on the forces that are hell bent upon exploiting them and decimating their personalities as human beings.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Dehumanization, Repression, Marginalization, Internalization.

Before proceeding to evaluate the texts to explore the response of women to patriarchal challenges in Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* and *That Long Silence*, Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* and *Blasphemy* and Nasrin's *Lajja*, it would be worthwhile to recall Nasrin's call to women of the sub-continent to invert, challenge and throw out the unreasonable restraints that hinder their growth as free and unrestrained individuals. Her book *No Country for Women*, a non-fiction work provides deep insights into the causes that marginalize women in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Shashi Deshpande presents Indian women trying to come to terms with a society where patriarchy calls the shots. *That Long Silence* represents the real life experiences, her turmoil and quest for identity of Jaya. The involvement of her husband in a fraud unsettles the uneasy poise in her life. The crisis shatters her dream and enthusiasm to become an ideal woman. All along she had suppressed her natural swing, the urge of creative writing. To prove herself a good wife and a caring mother, she had decimated her deep down creative impulses. She finds it difficult to acknowledge her fascination for Kamat, a widower living above their flat who treats her fairly and is supportive of her creative urge to write poetry. She even feigns detachment towards Kamat's death for fear of annoying her husband and thereby upsetting her matrimonial arrangement.

Inwardly She is broken at the loss of the friend who supported her ambitions without the shackles associated with matrimony. The 'Sacred' institution of marriage and the values ascribed to it retard a woman's personality. Deshpande appears to remark that it requires elements of suffocation, deceit and betrayal to sustain marriage. Vanita mami describes the husband as a sheltering tree haunts She recollects, "After so many years, the words come back to me A sheltering tree. Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable And so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies". (That Long Silence 32). Women fail to develop as individuals as they to make unreasonable compromises to keep their families in good humour and consequently they put up a façade of happiness, bliss and contentment. Jaya comes to the realization that she is a shadow of her husband Mohan for financial security. Moreover, Mohan blames Jaya for committing the financial fraud saying, "It was for you and the children that I did this (9)".

The Gross gender inequality weighs heavily on the mental makeup of Deshpande's women characters. Vimla, too, suffers at the hands of the drunkard husband who thrashes and tortures her at the slightest provocation. Through *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande once again projects issues and concerns related to Indian women, their response to belittling social customs, their impulse to rebel when pushed to the wall and their ultimate resignation to destiny. The Stories of Shakuntla, the mother of a rape victim and Urmila's mother-in-law, a marital rape victim, say it all. Urmila's interaction with Shakuntla, the mother of a rape victim reveals her humanitarian outlook and concern for the suffering women. Kalpana, the rape victim, lies unconscious in a hospital where Urmila's sister-in-law Vanna works. Shakuntla is shell-shocked and lapses into a denial mode on coming to know of her daughter's rape. She refuses to believe that her daughter has been raped. Deshpande here provides a peep into the psyche of women and their families affected by such brutal acts. Here, Urmila emerges as a crusading voice and takes the cudgels on behalf of the rape-victim by taking the matter to the press and getting the matter reinvestigated which had earlier been treated as an accident. The identity of the rapist gets established who is none other than Prabhakar, the husband of Shakuntla's sister. Urmila's initiative encourages other women to demonstrate in support of Kalpana's rights to be treated in a hospital. Her dynamic initiative stirred the conscience of the society and forced the government to intervene and act to bring the culprit to book. She recalls:

That night I got a call from Malcolm, 'Urmila, have you heard what happened in the assembly today? There were questions about Kalpana, noisy scenes, I believe the women were especially loud. Anyway, what will interest you is that the government's backtracked. They have ordered an investigation into Kalpana's case and she won't be transferred. That is great, isn't it?'"(183)

Urmila's despite her own personal shock of losing her daughter Anu motivates other women to evolve by shedding their weak-kneed approach to life and make efforts to occupy their rightful place in society. She snub's and admonishes women like Vana for playing second fiddle to their husbands. She is irritated at Vana's refrain, "Harish says" and advises her to be assertive about her own views, values and rights.

Urmila even makes women like Priti who are excited about securing their rights through the intervention of Courts. A court had ruled that a husband has no right to force the wife into a physical relationship against her will. Urmila remains unconvinced about the effectiveness of laws alone in safeguarding the women's freedom without the matching social consciousness. She is unconvinced that the presence of a woman Prime Minister like Indira Gandhi can make any difference on the lives of common women. Urmila turns out to be an instrument of change in society by assisting, motivating and lending support to women like Shakuntala and Vanaa to rise in rebellion against the unfair treatment meted out to them in the prevailing patriarchal set-up. Bhaskar Naikar observes, "Having entered a chakravayuha from which there is no escape, they want to make the best of their given life by hardening themselves to face the harsh realities of life" (Naikar 126).

Tehmina Durani has emerged as a force to reckon with in Pakistan by speaking out boldly against the feudal Islamic values leading to the brutalization of the minds and bodies of women. Both *My Feudal Lord* and *Blasphemy* depict the misery of women in Pakistani society. 'Mullahs' and feudal lords there enjoy unfettered powers to subjugate and enslave women. Tehmina's audacious writings exposed the dark deeds of feudal lords, 'men of Allah' where silence of women is taken for granted. By dedicating *My Feudal Lord* to Mustafa Khar's five ex-wives who had suffered brutalities at his hands, she, as his sixth wife, holds him accountable for his sins and calls upon society to follow, the true Islamic teachings, not the distorted ones meant to serve the vested interests of powerful politicians, feudal lords and so called 'Pirs'. By providing a graphic account of society where she was brought up, Tehmina provides insights into the psyche of the 'Khars', a tribe to which her husband Mustafa Khar belonged. Healing from the Neli Bari region of India near Kamalia, they, being defiant by nature,

refused to toe the line of their White masters and moved West. The following lines reflect their world view, “They slaughtered their women and children, so as not to impede their journey, then packed their vast stores of gold and migrated to the Punjab, settling along the banks of the Indus river”(My Feudal Lord 39). They practiced infanticide, dominated and exploited the farmers. “Feudalism was a license to plunder, rape and even murder. The rich got richer, the poor despaired” (40).

Tehmina, too, silently bore insults and domestic violence like Safia, Naubahar, Sherry and other women. Mustafa’s violent subjugating and irrational behavior erases and decimates Tehmina’s personality. No one comes to their rescue, not even their parents, brothers or sisters as if they have internalized feudal ways of life. And that emboldens beasts like Mustafa who beats Tehmina at the slightest provocation, starts a sexual relationship with her younger sister, Adila and even parades Tehmina naked in her bed room. Mustafa even kidnaps children and flies them to his home-town in Pakistan in a desperate attempt to force Tehmina to return to his fold. But Tehmina emerges as a free woman. She decides to invoke ‘Khulla’ to divorce Mustafa, unmindful of the financial implications involved. She even disowns her parents who had refused to stand with her. Even after losing everything material by invoking ‘Khulla’, she stood her ground. When Tehmina and Mustafa met over lunch after the divorce, Mustafa taunted her saying that she would now be called Mustafa’s ex-wife. After the publication of her autobiographical novel, she taunted Mustafa and told him that he would now have to introduce himself as Tehmina’s ex-husband.

Tehmina had given voice to the silence of Pakistani women gaged by cruel patriarchal laws that had imprisoned them. Given the socio-political realities of Pakistan, it appears as if most of them had been under house arrest. After the publications of My Feudal Lord, Tehmina was charged with adultery, a crime attracting death sentence. She had declared “Jehad a movement to represent the silent majority to raise controversial issues that most people afraid to speak about” (Durrani 381). In Blasphemy, too, Tehmina has targeted the custodians of shrines like Pir Sain who exploit illiterate, innocent and hapless women like Heer in the name of religion. Polygamy, rape, child molestation, wife-beating and even incest are a way to life here. It is a sad fact that people of South Asia, particularly women, being superstitious and God-fearing by nature fall into the trap of these ‘Babas’, ‘Mullahs’ and ‘Pirs’. Tehmina depicts the misery of Heer as being representative of all such unfortunate women who are married off early to save them from bringing dishonor to the family. Parents always fear that their daughters might bring shame for the family. Heer’s mother says, “It’s a caution against any form of dishonor that might befall our future generations from the hazardous actions of the female species-we women are known to be a curse” (Blasphemy 23). Such a parental mind-set pushes women like Heer into incompatible marriages which results in their doom. Heer’s hasty marriage to Pir Sain which her mother considers a bliss and god-sent opportunity, proves to be a hell for Heer. Tehmina exposes the devilish character of Pir Sain who blatantly exploits the women of the Havelli in the garb of a holy man. The hypocritical Pir, who physically exploits a number of women in the shrine beat her wife the day after her marriage for greeting her mother and some servants without a veil. She had “disobeyed Allah by not observing purdah from a male whom She could marry. But he was only six year old”(43). Heer enters Pir Sain’s prison, it was like life-imprisonment, there was no way out of it. She became used to Pir’s beatings. No deviation from the established norms was possible. Women spies reported even the slightest violations to her mother-in-law. Pir Sain’s physical assaults and forced sex with Heer shatter her ideas of a loving married life. His brutalities get worse as he receives reports of Heer’s acts of omission and commission from his women spies.

Tehmina presents Heer’s suffering in detail only to arouse the conscience of the silent women to move out of their shells to do something to mitigate their own suffering. Through Heer, Tehmina digs the bloody history of the shrine to create revulsion among common people about the impostors dwelling at such places and to convey the message, that by praying to Allah alone, one can work out one’s salvation. Imposters like Pir Sain don’t understand the importance of virtues like simplicity, humility and compassion. They interpret the scriptures to suit their convenience and to beguile the gullible commoners. Heer experiences every torture in the shrine and can judge their nefarious designs. She remarks “Middlemen and salesman had converted Muslims into grave worshippers. They led us back to the time of ‘Jahalia’ back to the conditions of our Prophet had freed us from back to the very reasons that had called for Islam”. (103) Pirs thrived on the ignorance and illiteracy of common people. They dreaded knowledgeable and enlightened people. No one is permitted to read Quran in translation. Heer’s undeserved suffering at the hands of Pir Sain, is an attempt by Tehmina to stir the conscience of a nation over its indifference to the wails of women in an Islamic State.

Taslima Nasrin raises the flag in support of equal rights and opportunities for women in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Her book *No Country for Women* delineates the reasons for the marginalization and repression of women. She has faced the wrath of religious fanatics for her writings against Mullahs and Maulvis who misuse religion for their petty selfish interests. It is worthwhile to remember that the publication of *Lajja* had created much reaction and mobs had attacked book shops selling Nasrin's books. Fanatics had placed price on her head and demanded that she should be put on trial for blasphemy. Her novel *Lajja* was banned by the government of Bangladesh fearing that it might lead to communal clashes. Nasrin raised her voice against the atrocities against women in the name of Islam. She showed the suffering of women in the Bangladeshi society where women had been raped, had their faces defaced by acid attacks, killed for dowry and treated as commodities. She pleaded changes in the 'Sharia' laws, the ones that had become outdated and the cause of repression of women.

Lajja shows the goings on in Bangladesh after the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Hindu girls had been kidnapped, raped and killed in the streets of Dhaka. The goons had no fear of law, possibly the administration turned a blind eye to their crimes against Hindus. The mass exodus of Hindus began from Bangladesh. Nasrin blames the fanatics for creating differences among different communities living together for years together. She criticizes Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia for tacitly supporting the activities of the fanatics bent upon damaging the secular character of the Bangladeshi society. Nasrin succeeds in her mission of giving a clarion call to the women to launch a movement for securing their just rights.

It follows from the above discussion that all the three women novelists have contributed a lot by presenting the misery of women in the societies of South Asia. The Novels also point to the enlightenment of the women, their un-acceptance of their position in society and their initiative to take on the forces that stand in the fulfillment of their genuine aspirations.

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