

## Depiction of Women in My Feudal Lord: A Feminist Analysis of Female Identity, Suffering, and Resistance”

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### Abstract

Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* is a significant feminist memoir in Pakistani English literature because it exposes the lived realities of women under feudal patriarchy. This paper examines the depiction of women in the memoir through the theoretical lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, particularly her ideas about subalternity, silencing, and female self-representation. Using a qualitative research design and close textual reading, the paper explores how female identity is represented through domestic servitude, shame, motherhood, voicelessness, and eventual self-assertion. The study argues that women in the memoir are portrayed as socially conditioned, emotionally burdened, and structurally marginalized figures whose lives are shaped by patriarchy, marriage, class privilege, and cultural expectations. At the same time, the memoir does not reduce women to passive victims. Through Tehmina's gradual transformation from a silenced wife into a speaking subject, the text offers a movement from endurance to resistance. The analysis demonstrates that *My Feudal Lord* is both a testimony of women's oppression and a literary act of feminist recovery. It reveals how women are denied agency in patriarchal discourse, yet also how autobiographical narration enables the reclamation of female voice, dignity, and selfhood.

**Keywords:** *My Feudal Lord*; depiction of women; feminism; Spivak; subalternity; patriarchy

### Introduction

Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* holds an important position in Pakistani English literature because it transforms the private suffering of a woman into a public critique of patriarchy. The memoir is not simply a personal narrative of an unhappy marriage; it is also a social document that reveals how women are positioned, judged, and silenced within a feudal-patriarchal order (Penny 66). Through its candid portrayal of female pain, humiliation, and eventual defiance, the memoir provides fertile ground for feminist analysis. It presents women not as abstract figures but as socially conditioned beings whose identities are formed under the weight of obedience, honor, fear, and dependence (Habib et al 93).

The memoir is set in a socio-cultural context where womanhood is largely defined through domestic roles. Women are expected to become dutiful daughters, obedient wives, and sacrificing mothers. Such expectations are not merely cultural preferences; they are mechanisms through which patriarchy sustains itself (Ehsan et al 56). A woman who submits is idealized, whereas a woman who questions, leaves, or speaks risks shame and exclusion. In *My Feudal Lord*, Durrani exposes this unequal structure by depicting how women's lives are governed by male power both inside and outside the home. The memoir shows that the oppression of women is not always spectacular; much of it is embedded in ordinary routines, moral standards, and emotional conditioning (Akbar 44).

A feminist reading of the memoir becomes especially meaningful when considered alongside Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern. Spivak's concern with the voicelessness of

marginalized women is highly relevant to Durrani's text because the memoir repeatedly illustrates how women are denied the right to speak authoritatively about their own suffering (Chowdhary 13). They are spoken for, judged by others, and restricted by structures that make their experience unsayable or socially unacceptable (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"). Spivak's argument that women at the margins often lack the conditions necessary to be heard helps illuminate the world of *My Feudal Lord*, where female testimony is undermined by patriarchy, family pressure, and feudal privilege (Mukta and Sanjoy 88).

The memoir's structure itself supports this feminist trajectory. Tehmina's journey from dependence to resistance is marked through the text's three-part movement: fascination, disillusionment, and awakening. In the opening phases, women are shown as silenced and confined. In the later phase, the female self begins to emerge with greater moral clarity and resistance. This movement is central to the memoir's feminist significance (Wellek and Rene 4). Durrani does not simply portray women as sufferers; she portrays how suffering becomes consciousness, and how consciousness develops into speech. This literary transition turns the memoir into a powerful act of self-recovery.

The present paper explores the depiction of women in *My Feudal Lord* through a Spivakian feminist framework. It argues that the memoir portrays women as socially constrained and emotionally burdened, yet capable of resilience and eventual resistance. By analyzing female identity through themes such as marriage, domesticity, shame, motherhood, and voice, the paper demonstrates that Durrani's memoir is both a record of women's oppression and a literary assertion of female subjectivity.

#### Problem Statement

Although *My Feudal Lord* has often been read as a memoir of domestic abuse and feudal domination, a more focused analysis is needed on how women are depicted in the text and what this depiction reveals about gender ideology in Pakistani society. The memoir presents women not only as victims of male violence but also as figures shaped by family honor, marital duty, motherhood, and emotional silence. This paper addresses the problem of women's representation in the memoir by examining how female identity is constructed within patriarchy and how that identity gradually shifts from compliance to resistance.

#### Research Questions

1. How are women depicted in *My Feudal Lord* within the social and cultural framework of patriarchy?
2. In what ways does the memoir portray women's movement from silence and suffering toward self-awareness and resistance?

#### Objectives

For this paper the following objectives are developed:

1. To explore the depiction of women in *My Feudal Lord* from a feminist perspective.
2. To analyze how female suffering, silence, and resistance shape women's identities in the memoir.

#### Literature Review

Ehsan et al. studied violence and sexual harassment against females in a medieval community in autobiographical work such as *My Feudal Lord* by Tehmina Durrani. It focuses on how females live under the controlled intentions of society, where they mainly agonize in discomfort, displeasure, mockery, and dismay. Corporeal viciousness is typically accompanied by spiritual exploitation and, in numerous situations, by sexual assault (Ehsan et al 56). According to Rehmat et al the beating of wives is a centuries-old phenomenon that can exceed all ethnic, class, and

natural limits. We can perceive the identical state in Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*, where females are maltreated by their life partners and by the feudal lords of their locality. All of these incidents and issues are hazardous for female identity. The author emphasizes major features of sexual harassment, violence against women, and hegemonic masculinity. In addition, the author also studied threats to female identity in the light of Kristeva's feminist views (Rehmat et al 303).

Rind and Muhammad studied gender power in the memoir of Tehmina Durrani, *My Feudal Lord*, through the Bourdieuan method based on Pierre Bourdieu's idea of "habitus," which is a significant method used to recognize the habits and actions of a person (Bourdieu). In line with Bourdieu, who stated that the structuring of an individual's general physical state begins after birth and is reinforced during life, this study evaluates and understands the habitus of Tehmina Durrani and Khar in an outdated and male-controlled society in Pakistan (Bourdieu). Through close reading analysis, this qualitative research emphasizes the role of habitus in constructing the roles of men and women in diverse ways, showing how the general physical state of a person is restructured and developed in a medieval culture. The study scrutinizes the struggle of the two chief characters, Khar and Tehmina, to continue or break down their communally made habitus. Lastly, the study concludes that although the general physical state of people is continuously structured into their mentality, it can still be broken in certain situations and states of affairs (Rind and Muhammad 247).

Kaur studied, in "Speaking from the Margins," Tehmina Durrani's memoir *My Feudal Lord*. She presents Durrani as a prominent woman writer of Pakistan who writes about the subordinated and marginal status of women in Pakistani civilization. Further, Durrani depicts the dejected dilemma of females in a so-called self-governing state. The memoir *My Feudal Lord* reflects women's suppression and miseries faced by women in the conventional setting of Pakistan. She enunciates her own experiences and holds the social, religious, and political mechanisms accountable for such female dilemmas in society (Kaur 34). Females, being at the margins, are deprived of the elementary right of equality at ideological, social, political, and economic levels. The analysis of Durrani's memoir mainly emphasizes numerous events of maltreatment by her husband and her effort to break the silence maintained for a long time in the name of integrity and God.

While Spivak showed how the social habitat prevents her from uprising, and she continuously struggles to be accepted by family members and society. She mainly guides her fellow women that they should not accept such conduct as destiny and may fight against such tendencies. The root causes of female marginality are feudalism and patriarchal discourse. Females should awaken to the fact that they do not become less human if they separate from their husbands through divorce. In short, Durrani made her voice heard against convention by writing this memoir (Spivak 154).

Zubair et al. studied changes in communal class, problems of domination associated with Pakistani women, and the function of agency offered in the selected work. This qualitative study, based on textual investigation, highlights the condition of Muslim women in Pakistan under political pressures. It also addresses the struggle to attain elementary rights and agency. There is continuous male-dominated pressure on women in South Asian states, and Tehmina Durrani has tried to show the actual state of Muslim women in Pakistan. The factual component in Durrani's text enhances its status in the demonstration of characters and truths. This study offers a real image of the extent to which women obtain agency and elementary rights. In short, inequality between men and women, political influence, and male domination remain under critical examination (Zubair et al 19).

Feudalism is a socio-economic and political phenomenon in Pakistan. Tehmina Durrani holds the feudal system responsible for the exploitation of women. According to Tehmina, feudal lords are entitled to oppress women, regardless of the relationship. Feudalism makes it lawful for men to subjugate women and makes men more powerful and authoritative. Feudalism misuses Islam as

a means to control and establish authority and religious superiority. The early lords were not corrupt and were indeed pious, but later generations failed to maintain the piety and righteousness of the system. They even misinterpreted the Quran for their own benefit. A feudal lord is an absolute authority whom nobody can reject (Durrani 40-41).

Thus, it is apparent that women are highly oppressed in a feudal system, and they accept this oppression to a certain extent due to patriarchal society, where feudal lords can justify their wrongdoings. Husbands believe ruling their wives is a right that comes as a bonus with marriage. And God forbid, if a woman stands for herself, she is labeled a rebel and therefore must be punished.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

This study is grounded in the feminist theory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, particularly her concept of the subaltern. Spivak examines how marginalized people, especially women in postcolonial societies, are often denied the power to speak for themselves within dominant social, cultural, and historical structures (Morton; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"). According to Spivak, women in Third World societies experience double marginalization because they are oppressed both by patriarchal systems and by broader political and social hierarchies. As a result, their voices are often silenced, misrepresented, or interpreted through male-centered perspectives. This framework is highly relevant to Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*, which presents the suffering, suppression, and resistance of a woman living within a feudal and patriarchal Pakistani society. Spivak's theory helps explain how women are denied agency, identity, and authority over their own experiences. Her argument that women must "learn to speak" and make audible what has long been silenced is particularly important for this study (Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame" 165). Through this lens, *My Feudal Lord* can be read as a text that exposes the oppression of women while also showing the struggle of a subaltern woman to reclaim her voice, identity, and selfhood.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design based on literary criticism. The primary text is Tehmina Durrani's memoir *My Feudal Lord*, which is examined through close reading in order to identify the thematic representation of women under patriarchal and feudal oppression. The research draws upon words, phrases, dialogues, and scenes from the memoir and interprets them within a feminist framework. Because the objective is interpretive rather than statistical, the qualitative method is appropriate for examining literary representation, female identity, and gendered power relations. The study is theoretically informed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's feminist thought, especially her arguments concerning subalternity, female silencing, and the politics of representation (Morton; Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame"; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"). The text is repeatedly read, relevant passages are selected through note-taking, and the collected material is organized thematically. The analysis focuses on the depiction of women through marriage, domestic labor, bodily control, motherhood, shame, silence, and resistance. Secondary scholarship is used to support interpretation and to situate Durrani's memoir within broader feminist debates about women's oppression and empowerment.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

*My Feudal Lord* (1995) is the true archetype of women's plight and their repressed condition. It has been written unambiguously and specifically in Pakistani context referring to the plight of women in patriarchal symbolic order. Though Durrani's work (1995) was marked as blasphemous on certain grounds yet the fact remained firm at its place that her work represents and shows the real picture of subjugation of women in third world countries on one hand, while on other it brings

to scene the unjust ruling of patriarchy which is directly responsible for the present discriminatory state of women. The book also offers many strategies to build resistance and create awareness regarding women's plight. Durrani's work illustrates that in third world countries like Pakistan, women are taken as personal properties and possessions of men since men control every sphere of lives of women even their behavior and movements.

The depiction of women in *My Feudal Lord* is shaped by a persistent tension between social conditioning and inner resistance. From the outset, Durrani presents womanhood as a role already determined by patriarchy. Tehmina remarks, "And yet clearly a man was the only future available to a Pakistani girl" (Durrani 28). This line encapsulates the restrictive horizon assigned to women: their value and destiny are imagined through men, marriage, and domesticity. Spivak's theory is particularly useful here because it explains how marginalized women are denied an independent discursive position. The woman is not first imagined as a self, but as someone whose meaning emerges only through patriarchal relation (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?").

This gendered conditioning continues within marriage, where the woman is expected to preserve the institution at any cost. Tehmina observes that "the society considers the failure of a marriage as the failure of a woman" (Durrani 29). This statement reveals the moral burden placed upon women. A marriage may be violent, humiliating, or unjust, yet responsibility for preserving it falls almost entirely upon the wife. The memoir thus depicts women as custodians of social honor rather than bearers of individual rights. In Spivakian terms, the female subject is made to inhabit a discourse where silence, endurance, and self-erasure are encoded as virtue.

Tehmina's own self-description shows how deeply this erasure penetrates. She confesses, "I had no power, no right, no will of my own" (Durrani 107). The force of this statement lies in its threefold dispossession: she lacks social power, recognized rights, and even personal will. Here, womanhood is represented as an existence emptied of agency. Spivak's argument that the subaltern woman is denied the conditions necessary for self-representation becomes strikingly applicable. Tehmina's problem is not simply that she suffers; it is that the system surrounding her does not acknowledge her as a legitimate speaking subject (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"). The memoir also presents women as domestic laborers whose role is reduced to service. Tehmina describes the ideal wife as a "**household slave**" (Durrani 46). This phrase is central to the depiction of women in the memoir because it exposes the patriarchal logic of marriage. The wife is not viewed as an equal companion but as one who serves, obeys, and absorbs. Such depiction aligns with Spivak's insight that subaltern women are often fixed within pre-existing social functions rather than allowed to define themselves autonomously (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"). In *My Feudal Lord*, women are expected to perform usefulness, not personhood.

Another important dimension of female portrayal is commodification. The feudal slogan "**Zar, Zan, Zameen**" treats woman alongside money and land, reducing her to a category of property. The memoir reinforces this idea through its repeated imagery of possession and confinement. Tehmina notes of another woman, "He plucked Safia from the heavens and locked her in a cage" (Durrani 45). The image of the cage is revealing: a woman may be admired, adorned, and even desired, yet still denied freedom. She is visible as an object but not recognized as a subject. This is precisely the kind of representational violence Spivak identifies, where women are produced as signs within patriarchal discourse rather than allowed to author their own meanings (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?").

The memoir also demonstrates that women are burdened with shame in ways men are not. When Tehmina attempts even limited self-expression, she is punished and morally condemned:

"Later, in our bedroom, my insolence was punished with yet another sharp slap. He called me an exhibitionist, a woman without shame" (Durrani 216).

Patriarchy thus works not only through force but through moral naming. Female resistance is immediately recoded as immodesty or dishonor. Spivak's argument that women "suffer silently in the holes of discourse" helps explain this structure: before a woman can articulate her truth, patriarchal language has already framed her as excessive, improper, or morally suspect (Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame" 165).

Motherhood introduces further complexity into the depiction of women. Tehmina is shown as deeply attached to her children, and this attachment makes her vulnerable to further control. Yet motherhood also becomes a source of strength and ethical clarity. The memoir refuses to simplify maternal identity. It shows that mothers are both emotionally exploited and morally fortified by their relationship with children. In feminist terms, this is an important portrayal because it moves beyond sentimentality and presents motherhood as politically charged. Women endure in silence partly because of their children, but they also find courage through them.

Crucially, the memoir does not leave women trapped in voicelessness. Its deepest feminist achievement lies in the transformation of the female figure from silent endurance to narrative authority. Tehmina eventually rejects the patriarchal identity imposed upon her and states that she "did not want to lean on a pillar that had fallen upon her instead of supporting her" (Durrani 374). The metaphor of the fallen pillar dismantles the patriarchal myth that man is naturally the woman's protector. Even more powerfully, she declares:

"Well, Mustafa, now the world will soon know you only as Tehmina  
Durrani's ex-husband" (Durrani 382).

This statement reverses the logic of patriarchal naming. The woman who was supposed to derive identity from the man becomes the point through which the man is redefined. Through Spivak's framework, this transition is particularly meaningful. Spivak remains cautious about the ease with which the subaltern woman can "speak," since dominant systems often distort or absorb that speech. Yet Durrani's memoir offers a powerful literary response to that dilemma. By writing the memoir, Tehmina converts private suffering into public testimony. The text itself becomes the space in which the silenced woman speaks back. It is not merely a narrative of pain; it is an intervention against the structures that thrive on women's silence (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?").

### Conclusion

*My Feudal Lord* depicts women as socially conditioned, emotionally burdened, and structurally marginalized figures living under feudal patriarchy. Through the memoir's representation of marriage, domestic servitude, shame, and motherhood, Durrani exposes how women are denied agency and reduced to functional roles. At the same time, the memoir resists reducing women to permanent victims. Tehmina's movement from silence to speech demonstrates the possibility of feminist self-recovery. Read through Spivak, the memoir emerges as both a representation of subaltern female suffering and a literary act of reclaiming voice. It is therefore an important feminist text that reveals not only how women are oppressed, but also how they begin to narrate themselves against patriarchy.

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