
Women's Bodies as Sites of Struggle: A Feminist Critique on Selected Pakistani Fiction

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Abstract

This article explores the struggle of two female protagonists for their identity in the man-made world, where cultural and social norms have possessed them like demons. 'Zaitoon' in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* and the novelist herself as protagonist in Tehmina Durrani's memoir *My Feudal Lord* are the two characters chosen for this discussion. By applying Kristeva and Butler's theories, this study reveals these women as trend setters of resistance against the patriarchal structures of Pakistan. The novels subject to discussion are firmly grounded in the lived experiences of women. These women's bodies assume the central position in their struggle of self-assertion. In both the novels, the female characters experience their bodies as the battlegrounds, subjected to male control—sexually, physically and emotionally. The novelists position these women in opposition to culturally imposed norms that seek to dominate their bodies and reduce them to symbols of male honour. Their narratives expose a deep-rooted male obsession with the female body in a society where men determine women's status, roles, clothing and behavior, both within the household and at the national level. This recurring theme in the works of Sidhwa and Durrani supports a feminist interpretation that challenges the patriarchal foundations of Pakistani society.

Keywords: Culture, Objectification, Resistance, Struggle, Taboos

Introduction

This study deals with two female characters, Zaitoon from *The Pakistani Bride* and Tehmina from *My Feudal Lord*. By using Kristeva and Butler's concepts of resilience against patriarchy, this research attempts at exploring these two characters as trend setters, who chose to stand firm against power structures of the patriarchy in Pakistan.

Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* is the story of Afshan and Zaitoon. It begins with a brief introduction of Afshan; a tribal girl given as compensation to Qasim's father for a loan that Afshan's father was unable to pay. Afshaan later on becomes Qasim's wife. Qasim, however, loses his family due to smallpox and leaves for Lahore to find work. Hence the novel narrates story Zaitoon, a young girl rescued by a tribal man Qasim and adopted as daughter, amid a train attack during the chaos of muslim refugees migrating to newly formed Pakistan. She goes to live with him in Lahore for several years. As she grows into adulthood, Qasim arranges her marriage to her nephew Sakhi, who hails from the tribal region of Kohistan. However, Zaitoon finds herself trapped in an unhappy marriage. Toward the end of the novel, she escapes the oppressive bond and makes her way to Lahore.

Similarly, Tehmina's *My Feudal Lord* is a groundbreaking autobiographical memoir. It chronicles Tehmina's horrified fourteen-year marriage to Ghulam Mustafa Khar. She endured physical,

emotional, and sexual abuse in Pakistani feudal and patriarchal system. Apart from being a memoir, the novel is a social critique as well. It reflects Tehmina's struggle against patriarchy, her escape, exile and return as a resilient woman to breakthrough and confront.

Theoretical Framework

The current research explores the escape, courage and resilience of the two selected protagonists by applying Kristeva and Butler's theories (few aspects) on the gender dynamics and patriarchal structures in Pakistan. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that gender identity is performatively constituted, and gender is produced and sustained through acts, language, dress, gestures and social norms. Hence, gender identity as masculinity and femininity is not fixed, it is constructed within historical and cultural contexts. Moreover, the patriarchal system maintains itself by enforcing rigid performances of man and woman. Any deviation from these strict norms is not accepted, rather punished. Drawing from Foucault, Butler also states that individuals are made through power structures. We are not outside power; we exist within the structure. Gender norms in power structures create our sense of self. Therefore, in a feudal-patriarchal society, women identity is shaped by those very structures. The women become wives, honor bearers, property etc through repeated social conditioning. Subversion occurs when individuals start troubling these societal norms. Because gender is performative, it is unstable and can be disrupted. Durrani's memoir can be seen through Butler's lens as a disruption of gender performance. The protagonist refuses the gender script, stops performing her role as an obedient wife and articulates her own narrative outside the patriarchal structure. Her rebellion shows the possibility of re-performing the gender roles. Likewise, Sidhwa's protagonist Zaitoon's escape into the mountains becomes a symbolic attempt at breaking free from the structures behind her. She refuses to conform to the societal norms, resists silence, and becomes a threat to the whole tribal- patriarchal system. The tribal patriarchy depends on women consistently enacting their roles. Tribal women who comply are protected, those who deviate are punished. Zaitoon's rebellion reveals the artificial and fragile nature of these roles.

Like Butler, Kristeva also rejects the notion of a fixed, essential self. For both, identity is unstable and continuously constructed. Kristeva, however, is a psychoanalyst, who reworks Freudian and Lacanian ideas and explores how cultural norms operate through repression, desire and the unconscious. According to her, patriarchy survives by excluding and fearing the maternal/feminine. Thus, it both relies on women for existence and erases their power and language. Therefore, according to Kristeva, gendered oppression is unconscious, cultural and linguistic, not just legal or social.

The tribal, feudal and political systems Tehmina and Zaitoon navigate in their respective stories are structured by masculine authority-legal, cultural and marital. Both are subjected to extreme patriarchal symbolic control. They are inserted into this order by marriage. They are silenced, invalidated and rendered invisible by their husbands as well as society. Their entry into the Symbolic is only possible if they break down the patriarchal power. Their resistance and escape are reclaiming their power. Abjection, according to Kristeva, is central and comes when women defy the patriarchal power. Women are cast out when they threaten the patriarchal order. Both the women cross symbolic boundaries, both reject marriage, sexual violence and obedience. Tehmina reclaims her power through writing and self-expression, whereas Zaitoon reclaims hers through bodily resistance and survival. Through the above-mentioned framework, the current study explores both the novels subject to discussion.

Research Objectives

1. To discuss Zaitoon in Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* and Tehmina in Durrani's memoir *My Fuedal Lord* as trend setters of resistance against Pakistani patriarchal and feudal traditions
2. To analyze the reasons of objectification of women bodies as the struggle sites for self-assertion as reflected in the selected novels

Research Questions

1. How Zaitoon in Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* and Tehmina in Durrani's memoir *My Fuedal Lord* act as trend setters of resistance against Pakistani patriarchal and feudal traditions?
2. Why women bodies become the struggle sites for self-assertion as reflected in the selected novels?

Text Analysis

This portion discusses in great length both the novels' protagonists in order to answer the research questions.

The Pakistani Bride

An early episode of the novel—where, Afshan, a young girl, is given to Qasim's father as compensation for a debt her father could not repay—reveals the objectified status of women in the tribal regions of Pakistan, where a girl can be treated as a transaction between men. The novel is inspired by a true story of a girl married off in the mountainous area of Pakistan. Sidhwa first encountered this story during her honeymoon and was deeply disturbed to learn that the girl, after escaping her husband, was eventually hunted down and killed by him. While the novel exposes such male brutality, Sidhwa alters the real-life outcome by allowing her female protagonist to survive her escape, emphasizing her intent to portray women as resilient in the face of male oppression. Through her narrative, Sidhwa critiques the unjust treatment of women by Pakistani men, whether from the remote tribal regions like Kohistan or the urban centers like Lahore, demonstrating that the patriarchal violence persists across social and geographic boundaries.

According to Judith Butler, societal institutions such as patriarchy, the family, and feudalism function as systems of power that oppress marginalized groups and become the root causes of their exploitation. In *Feminist Political Theory*, Valerie Bryson echoes this view by referencing Kate Millett, who asserts that "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family". Many radical feminists support this argument, challenging traditional political theory by emphasizing that the family is not a neutral or private space, but a key component of society's power structure. It both reinforces patriarchal dominance in the public sphere and serves as a direct

source of women's oppression (Bryson 175-176). These power structures represent their conduct with the other sections of the society as normal and not artificial, as Bryson articulates, "Far from being a 'natural' arrangement or individual choice based on mutual love and respect in which the emotional, sexual and domestic needs of adult partners are met and their children cared for, it is a social institution in which women's labor is exploited, male sexual power may be violently expressed and oppressive gender identities and modes of behavior are learned (176)". The marriage as an institution, is rooted in power structures that deny women equality, respect, and the freedom to live according to their own choices. Women are not only stripped of political and legal rights but are also culturally conditioned to accept male dominance without question. As a result, Zaitoon remains silent and unable to resist her father's decision to marry her off to Sakhi. For Butler, gender is constructed through our own repetition of gendered performance as it is "a stylized repetition of acts". Sidhwa shows through Zaitoon that women are constrained within the enclosures of the male-defined rules of purdah and modesty physically, emotionally and sexually. This binds the cruelty against women with their bodies. However, I argue that

Sidhwa's female protagonist refuses to be oppressed and breaks free from patriarchal boundaries to proclaim control over her body. As Sofia Sanchez-Grant (2008) notes, "the female body as a site of oppression has always been the means by which patriarchy exerts control over women" (Sanchez-Grant, 2008, p.78). In the same article, Margaret Sanger claims that, "no woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body...It is for women the key to liberty" (cited in Sanchez-Grant, 2008, p.78). Zaitoon, too, exists within a patriarchal society, where men are determined to control women's bodies by any means necessary. One interpretation of 'Purdah' involves the physical covering of a woman's body, making the body itself a focal point

of control, both within and beyond the practice. 'Purdah' thus becomes a tool for the physical, emotional, and psychological regulation of female bodies and sexuality. Consequently, for a woman to attain any sense of freedom, she must first reclaim agency over her own body.

Both Zaitoon and Miriam (the care taker) are portrayed as challenging the male-defined boundaries of 'Purdah' on several occasions, however, they do not seek to completely abandon or reject the practice. In the plains, women's lives are shaped by a more visible and tangible form of 'Purdah', where garments like cloaks, *chadors*, and *burkhas* serve as physical barriers surrounding the female body. In contrast, among the tribal communities of Kohistan, purdah is enforced in a subtler, more structured way. Here the towering mountains and the enclosed courtyards act as natural enclosure, creating physical spaces that isolate and protect women from the outside space. Jane (1995) explains, "Qasim a hill tribal belongs to a society where truly speaking there is no strict purdah but the isolated hills, the rigid code of honour, the strong sense of kinship act like purdah" (Jane 217). The stark contrast between the rigid honour code of the Kohistani tribe and the relatively lenient practice of seclusion in Lahore's plains becomes evident in a particular incident where Qasim is taken aback by Nikka's casual inquiry about his wife. Qasim firmly asserts that, in his culture, discussing one's wife is considered inappropriate, highlighting the deeply ingrained norms of honour and female invisibility in tribal society, "look, he snarled nothing about my wife concerns you...you don't ask a hill-man anything about his womenfolk: I would have slit your throat" (Sidhwa 36). On the other hand, Nikka talks openly about his wife, "I have a wife. Does it offend you to hear me tell of my own womenfolk? ... She is barren" (Sidhwa 37). Nikka goes on to speculate about the possible reasons of her barrenness, even commenting on her health issues, while Qasim responds with silent embarrassment. This exchange highlights the differing ways in which both men engage with the purdah system.

Unlike Qasim, who adheres strictly to the tribal code that forbids speaking about one's wife, Nikka is more relaxed and does not hesitate to discuss his wife, openly with a stranger.

In Pakistani society, girls are often restricted from leaving the house or interacting with strangers. They are prohibited from engaging in romantic relationships, while men typically enjoy greater personal freedom. Women are denied the right to live according to their own choices and are largely excluded from political and social arenas, which remain male-dominated. Papsi Sidhwa also explores the concept of purdah by depicting the spatial segregation within homes in the plains of Lahore. When Zaitoon accompanies Miriam on her regular visits to neighbours, she observes that the inner section of the houses are designated for women:

Rooms with windows open to the street were allotted to the men: the dim maze of inner rooms to the women - a domain given over to procreation, female odours and the interminable care of children...Entering their dwellings was like stepping into gigantic wombs; the fecund, fetid worlds of mothers and babies." (Sidhwa 55-56)

The gender-segregated areas within homes, known as *zananas*, are deeply tied to notions of female sexuality, encompassing roles such as childbearing, caregiving, and domestic responsibilities—all of which are expected to remain confined to these spaces. Adolescent girls are prepared for motherhood within these quarters as part of their socialization. When Miriam realizes that Zaitoon has reached puberty, she considers it necessary to introduce her to the expected duties of women within the *zanana*. While Miriam begins to guide Zaitoon through the complexities of motherhood, she simultaneously associates it with purdah with the suppression of the sexual knowledge, blending traditional expectations with imposed ignorance.

Therefore, when she gets married, her innocence and ignorance about sexual and marital relationship are a matter of great relief and pride for Sakhi as he is convinced of her modesty.

Not able to comprehend the nature of the events that follow, Zaitoon tries to struggle but Sakhi further asserts his possession over her body by saying "Why not? It's my cunt!' he breathed" (Sidhwa 162).

This shows that women are taken as personal properties and possessions because men want to control them. Additionally, Sakhi's selfish jealousy is exhibited on numerous instances in the form of corporeal violence. As once when Zaitoon is out in the Mountains searching for firewood

as part of her daily chores, she waves at the passing jeep of army officers. Sakhi who happens to witness this incident is furious, “‘You whore’ he hissed ...He cleared his throat and spat full in her face. ‘You dirty, black little bitch, waving at those pigs...You wanted him to stop and fuck you, didn’t you!’” (Sidhwa 185). Sakhi proves more brutal towards Zaitoon, “He slapped her hard,” This sense of being suspected of immoral behaviour, untrusting gazes and constant surveillance lead Zaitoon to question her identity.

Towards the end Zaitoon does not adjust to the harsh bond of marriage as Kohistan is a harsh land and “Tribals are different; they are savages, uncouth and ignorant!” (93) The harsh injustice that she receives leaves her with no option but to leave her husband and run away, thus convincingly portraying Butler’s remarks that performativity is always subversive. Women are urged to break free from male defined structures of piety and modesty to assert their individuality and identity. It is not easy as the real freedom is in finding the ways of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in. Thus, Sidhwa allows Zaitoon to bravely challenge male oppression without discarding her modesty but able to transcend it. Zaitoon’s escape from her

husband’s home therefore poses a direct threat to ‘a settled patriarchal order’ of Sakhi’s tribe.

My Feudal Lord

Tehmina Durrani’s autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord*, critically examines the cultural and gender constructs that underpin the systemic exploitation and subjugation of women in traditional Pakistani society. The narrative reveals, how Durrani, the protagonist and author, is subjected to brutal treatment by her husband, experiencing physical, psychological, and emotional abuse within his household. The novel explores themes of gendered binaries, identity, and structural inequality, effectively illustrating the subordinate status of women in Pakistan.

Julia Kristeva’s feminist theory—particularly her distinction between the semiotic and symbolic—offers a relevant framework for analyzing Durrani’s memoir. Kristeva argues that a child initially gravitates towards the mother, a relationship she terms as semiotic. However, societal structures later reorient the child’s identification towards the father, aligning with the symbolic order, which is rooted in the authority and patriarchal power. This transition from semiotic to symbolic represents a deeply embedded ideological system that is difficult to dismantle. In *My Feudal Lord*, the male dominated social order is responsible for producing a chauvinistic figure like Mustafa Khar. Khar is not inherently authoritarian; rather, he is shaped by societal norms that reinforce male dominance and female submission. The memoir contains numerous instances that demonstrate how entrenched social inequalities enable the oppression of women. Nonetheless, towards the conclusion of the narrative, Durrani challenges and ultimately subverts the culturally and socially imposed gender roles. By divorcing her husband in a deeply conservative society, she reclaims her autonomy and asserts her individual identity, breaking free from the passivity, traditionally expected of women.

In Pakistan’s conservative society, most marriages are not founded on mutual respect, love, or understanding. Instead, they often become mechanisms for controlling and dehumanizing women, largely due to their economic dependence and perceived biological inferiority. In such a context, feudalism and restrictive legal structures contribute significantly to the marginalization and abuse of women. Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* offers a vivid portrayal of this reality, as articulated by Srivastava:

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. 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 behaviour and movements.” (159)

My Feudal Lord, represents Tehmina as bound by her mother, who has a dominant personality. She wants all her children to be submissive. She says that if she fails to be a compliant daughter, she cannot become a perfect wife or mother. Kristeva points out that patriarchy creates the

designs of Men's supremacy and Women's otherliness on the basis of symbolic or cultural perception and not the natural ones. While both are inseparable, attached and independent. Repression or subjugation of one and dominance and control of other causes threat to the smooth and even running of social order. In a society like Pakistan's, a woman's identity is recognized by her relation with her father, husband or son; she is not identified as an individual on her own. They have to be compliant to men. In patriarchal societies such as Pakistan's, the purpose of a woman's life is to get married in a good household, and, bear and raise children:

There was no question of discovering oneself. Identity and individuality were crushed. Personality failed to develop. My mind became a sanctuary for secret thoughts of escaping from this household. But for that there was no other goal in life but marriage. (Durrani 29-30)

Pakistani society works on "double standard" where men are allowed to live their lives freely on their wishes but women are not. Mary Ellen Snodgrass in her *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature* as:

The codification of laws, rules, and social expectations for women forces on half the world's population a more stringent regulation based solely on gender. . . In planning a home for their new wives, the men project a welcoming place where their mates anticipate the men's needs, serve their favorite foods, and tend to laundry and cleaning without male involvement. More dismaying to the female citizens . . . is the prevalent male attitude toward child rearing, which society thrusts upon women and demands that they enjoy despite the martyrdom and isolation of day-to-day responsibility for socializing, disciplining, and educating each new addition to the family (150).

When a woman deviates from societal and cultural expectations, she is often coerced into conformity. This coercion takes the form of physical violence, psychological suppression, and the constant instillation of fear. In traditional patriarchal settings, an authoritative, controlling, and conservative husband is frequently idealized as the norm. Temina Durrani, with striking honesty, acknowledges that she herself, became ensnared in the toxic dominance of her husband, Khar, falling victim to the very patriarchal structures she later critiques, "That Mustafa was authoritarian, conservative and overpowering I knew from the start – but that was precisely what attracted me so much. Psychologically I had suffered from my father's weak role in our family. Now here was someone who presented a quite different personality (39)". After their marriage, Mustafa Khar imposes numerous restrictions on Tehmina, confining her within the four walls of his home, and isolating her completely from the outside world.

Tehmina is physically beaten, sexually disgraced and psychologically devastated by Khar. Consequently, she goes to consult a doctor after seriously injured in eye and ear. She mentions in the novel that it was a sudden strike from Khar, he threw her on bed and jumped on her, slapping her in the face repetitively. He pulled her hair, threw her against the wall, again and again (102-103). He makes it his routine to beat her daily, making any slight thing as an excuse. He does not tolerate a slight mistake committed by Tehmina and tells her, "Never – ever – disobey me! You have to do what I tell you to do (95)." She is locked in the room, disconnected from the outside world, she could only move out of the house if she agreed to wear *burkha*.

Furthermore, Mustafa emotionally blackmails Tehmina so that she is silent and does not spill the beans in front of her family and friends. Tehmina is obedient enough to consider it a private matter concerning only these two, and she keeps silence. She even convinces herself of the inaccurate version of Quran, "According to feudal tradition, a wife was honour bound to live her life according to her husband's whims. A woman was like a man's land – 'The Koran says so,' he said (107)". This is how the patriarchal structures manipulate women in the name of religion by totally misinterpreting it according to their wishes. This is the time she feels herself trapped, she mentions, "I had fallen 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)". She represents the average upbringing of Pakistani women, where they are told to be submissive and obedient in front of their husbands otherwise, they will lose their respect in the society, and will bring a disgrace to their family. "In our society, marriage may be purgatory, but divorce is hell (77)" and a

“divorcee in Pakistani society is always a prime target for malicious gossip. Wagging tongues and leering glances turned me into a recluse (85)”. Hence, despite the tyranny of the husband, a woman in Pakistani society serves her husband, and makes every possible attempt to save her marriage, “I had to keep my marriage together for the sake of my children and myself. I had invested too much pain and compromise in this relationship to let it go now (217)”. The social conditioning of women works to such an extent that the treatment they face, they think to be their destiny. But there is excess of everything. Tehmina suffers a lot, and whenever she decides to leave her husband, she is brought back to her home by her husband very cleverly. Once she challenges:

‘If you are Mr Khar, I am *Mrs* Khar. If you learned from Mr Bhutto, I have learned from you. If you blackmail me, I’ll blackmail you. I will face up to the situation and fight you just as you are fighting me. I will not let you get away with it!’ (244)

However, towards the end, she takes a decision divorce her husband, but she is forced to revert this decision as Khar got imprisoned. He is so selfish that he asked her to remain faithful to him and his cause. As she is conditioned to be an obedient wife, she agrees to be by his side, “I fell suddenly in love with a noble idea – the return of the exiled leader (252)”. She is convinced by Mustafa to be by his side, “The words I had written on the Koran haunted me: ‘I will stand by Mustafa through his incarceration be it for life.’ (292)”. By campaigning for her husband for a long time, she gets succeeded in getting him free. However, Mustafa does not even appreciate her for her efforts. On the contrary, he resumes his affair with Adila, Tehmina's sister. When she opposes their illicit relations, Mustafa declares Tehmina to be a mentally sick person:

‘Tehmina isn’t well at all,’ he said with feigned compassion. ‘She’s imagining things,’ he contended (166).

Thus, she is proved mentally sick by Mustafa, when she has tried to disapprove the illicit relations of Mustafa and her sister. She gets double the punishment when she prevents him from exploiting her sister. Whenever she has tried to get divorce from him, he does whatever he can to bring her back to him. Once, he kidnaps his own children. Another time, he locks her up in the bathroom. After being suffered for many years, Tehmina gets tired from her brutal husband. She has tried to get divorced from him, many times, and she becomes successful in the end also.

However, she has to pay very heavy price for a life of independence. She has to leave the custody of all her children; she has to leave the financial assistance from her husband.

Thus, by getting divorce from her brutal husband, Tehmina Durrani has tried to subvert the traditional gender and cultural norms of the society. In the words of Susan Hekman, “What Butler advocates in lieu of feminist identity politics is ‘gender trouble’: engaging inactions that subvert gender identity. If ‘woman’ is created by the acts that define gender, then acting subversively will destabilize that identity. Such acts were Butler’s prescription for feminist politics (99)”. If women in society try to do those actions, which are opposite to the norms others may also follow their example. Thus, the existing norm or societal rule gets changed gradually. This is what Butler’s theory of performativity says. Subversion of an existing norm is the only method to make oneself get accepted.

Conclusion

Subsequently, both the novels represent the protagonists who are subjected to objectification by the patriarchy in Pakistan. Both the novels offer powerful illustrations of how gendered subjectivity is formed, fractured and fought for.

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