

**Male Chauvinism and Patriarchal Power in My Feudal Lord: A Feminist Critique of Gender Oppression”**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the representation of male chauvinism and patriarchal power in Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* through the feminist theory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The memoir is read as a powerful literary exposure of the ways male supremacy operates through violence, emotional manipulation, sexual double standards, social privilege, and feudal authority. The study argues that Mustafa Khar is not represented merely as an abusive husband, but as the embodiment of a patriarchal system that normalizes women’s subordination while preserving male impunity. Through close textual reading, the paper investigates how chauvinistic masculinity is performed through the control of female speech, bodily punishment, public humiliation, maternal blackmail, and moral hypocrisy. Spivak’s concern with the silencing of the subaltern woman provides a valuable theoretical frame for understanding how patriarchy denies women the conditions necessary to speak and be heard. The analysis further shows that Durrani’s memoir challenges this silencing by transforming personal suffering into public testimony. Thus, *My Feudal Lord* emerges not only as a narrative of women’s oppression, but also as a feminist intervention against feudal patriarchy and male authoritarian power.

**Keywords:** male chauvinism; patriarchy; Tehmina Durrani; *My Feudal Lord*; Spivak; feudalism; feminist critique

**Introduction**

Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* is one of the most powerful autobiographical critiques of patriarchy in Pakistani English literature. By narrating her marriage to the feudal politician Ghulam Mustafa Khar, Durrani reveals how male power operates behind the façade of public respectability (Rind et al 250). The memoir is significant because it does not treat patriarchy as an abstract concept; rather, it demonstrates how it works through everyday domination, moral double standards, violence, and emotional terror. In this sense, the text is both literary and political. It exposes the intimate mechanisms through which male supremacy is exercised and normalized (Akbar, 50).

Male chauvinism in the memoir is represented as more than a private personality trait. It is shown as a broader ideology of entitlement in which men assume authority over women’s speech, movement, body, and identity. The husband claims the right to question, punish, accuse, and possess (Mukta et al 80). The wife, by contrast, is expected to tolerate, remain loyal, preserve appearances, and sacrifice herself for marriage and family. This unequal structure is central to the memoir’s feminist argument.

Male transgression is tolerated, even admired, while female resistance is pathologized as rebellion, shamelessness, or failure (Rehmat et al 304).

The text becomes especially compelling when read alongside Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity. Spivak's work illuminates how marginalized women are not only oppressed materially but are also denied representation within dominant discourse (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?") (Durrani 1995). In *My Feudal Lord*, Tehmina repeatedly attempts to survive within structures that mistrust her voice, discipline her body, and interpret her experience through patriarchal assumptions. The memoir thus dramatizes the crisis that Spivak identifies: the woman at the margins may speak, yet the structures of power prevent her speech from carrying full authority (Ehsan et al 60). Durrani's memoir is also a critique of the alliance between patriarchy and feudalism. Mustafa Khar is not simply a violent husband; he is a feudal lord and politician whose class privilege protects him (Zubair, 11). The household becomes an extension of feudal authority, and the wife becomes one more domain over which power is exercised. This paper argues that male chauvinism in *My Feudal Lord* must therefore be read as a structural phenomenon rooted in social hierarchy, political influence, and gender ideology rather than as a purely personal failing.

### **Problem Statement**

While *My Feudal Lord* is widely recognized as a text about women's suffering, the specific mechanisms of male chauvinism and patriarchal domination in the memoir require closer analysis. The text reveals that women are oppressed not only through physical violence but also through suspicion, moral double standards, emotional manipulation, and feudal privilege. Male authority is presented as normal, while women's resistance is punished or shamed. This paper addresses the problem of how male chauvinism is represented in the memoir and how it functions as a literary depiction of patriarchal power.

### **Research Questions**

1. What forms of male chauvinism are depicted in *My Feudal Lord*?
2. How does the memoir represent the relationship between patriarchy, feudal authority, and women's subjugation?

### **Objectives**

1. To examine the representation of male chauvinism in *My Feudal Lord*.
2. To analyze how patriarchal and feudal power structures sustain women's oppression in the memoir.

### **Literature Review**

Feudalism nurtures Mustafa Khar's autocracy which contributes to Tehmina's miseries in her marriage with him. Though apparently Mustafa shows his disdain for feudalism, it is the same feudal learning that leads to Tehmina's plight (Morton, 102). He behaves the same way with his other wives, Wazir, Firdaus, Safia, Naubahar and shahrazad (Sherry) as he did with Tehmina and had many other relations out of wedlock. Feudalism made him act impulsively for feudal lords are always justified in their actions (Kaur 40). Despite all the miseries that Mr. Khar brought to his wives yet not even a single one of them dared to hold him accountable. Tehmina was a married woman with a loveable and compassionate husband but it did not stop Mustafa from trapping the already married lady. He wanted to impress her because he was attracted towards her physical appearance (Zaidi et al., 15). It took Tehmina a long time to understand that it was only her prettiness that mattered for her feudal lord and nothing else. It was mere boredom that led Tehmina to marry Mustafa. Tehmina overlooked society and even her own family's wishes and went ahead to marry Khar. At that time Sherry was holding the status of Khar's fifth wife and it was she who showed Mustafa's real face to Tehmina.

“When he had discovered Safia’s infidelity, he had, apparently, beaten her without mercy and broken several of her ribs. But, even worse, he had ordered one of the maids to insert red chili powder into the vagina of poor Dai Ayesha, the nanny, for not informing him of the affair” (Durrani 94).

According to Bari, “Women were his obvious victims. He was out to destroy us” (Durrani, 95). But she does not believe her until she herself faced Mustafa’s anger when failed to register herself at the doctor’s as “Begum Mustafa Khar” and later on when Mr. Khar discovered that he was enraged. He scolded her by saying, “Never-ever- disobey me! You have to do what I tell you to do”? (Durrani 95). This state of affairs reflects Mustafa Khar’s superiority and inferiority complex. Nobody could afford to go against his will as such to him it was tantamount to disobedience and considering him inferior. He used to scold Tehmina on one pretext or the other.

“A feudal lord understands... the power of physical violence” (Bari 134). Tehmina followed his orders. Mustafa was such a ruthless person that even his housemaids were not free from his torture. Once he ordered milk for Tehmina but the maid forgot to bring milk. “Mustafa thrust his foot squarely against Dai’s backside, sending her flying through the doorway” (Durrani 100). Gradually, Tehmina realized that “she had fallen into the trap of a typical Pakistani marriage” (Durrani 100). Tehmina writes, “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” (Durrani 100). Onwards Tehmina was insulted and abused by her husband on one account or the other. Even during her pregnancy with Mustafa’s first child, Mustafa tortured her for she was reluctant to give details of her wedding night with Anees, Mustafa, “Sitting astride my belly, he slapped me in the face repeatedly with his open palm, forehand and backhand. I fought to stifle my screams as he pulled at my hair, thrusting my head from side to side” (Durrani 102).

From religious outlook cultural approaches and civilization has been transformed over years and during the process several of its elements have been replaced which leads to better understanding of gender discrimination (Edgell 21). Culture reflects itself in our attitudes and actions in the form of beliefs, symbols and metaphors which acts as tools in a cultural ‘toolkit’ (Swindler 1986). With the help of these cultural tools people set boundaries between themselves and others on the basis of which they are categorized as the members of the worthy or the unworthy groups (Tranby and Zulkowski 21).

In 1985, Margaret Atwood in her book *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a dystopian memoir set in a male-chauvinistic society where women are treated as reproducing machines. Men use religion to their own benefit to the fullest and gain power from it in their marital relations. Women are treated as women as long as they surrender and subjugate. But the second thought of standing up for themselves come across their minds they are labeled as unwomen (Margaret 85). Gender and sexuality are prominent angles according to which the limits are set specially for the conservative ones in the society. Cultural tendencies play a dominant role in shaping the thoughts, behaviors and actions of the society. (Hoffmann and Bartkowski 91). In the present age of globalization and advancement of technology cultural assimilation is taking place. The atrocities of Feudal are product of the Feudal system transmitted from one generation to another. Cultural norms and misinterpretation of religion leads to gender discrimination and patriarchy.

It is stated that harassing and exploiting women due to gender discrimination, coming from the cultural aspect, is inhuman and should be eradicated. Even on the day of her birth a female child is greeted with this gender based discrimination and for the past ten years violence and sexual harassment is on the rise in our society (Ikramullah, 71). The violence against women is committed in many forms. Sometimes it is physical, other times sexual and in majority of cases it is the psychological mistreatment that a woman gets from her home or the society outside. This violence generates from the inferior status of women in society and is referred to wife beating, bickering and domestic violence. Pakistani women are highly violated mostly by the feudals. Women are

commodities that belong to men (Bari, 69). Women are abused physically, raped martially, burnt to death, tortured psychologically and made to suffer by her own family (Habib 95). Women are not given their due credit for the responsibilities they undertake. They are also deprived of the status that they deserve in a society. This woman exploitation is prevalent in different communities but with different frequency and intensity (Jaspal and Marco 814). The ratio of women who are beaten and abused is one out three around the world. Feudalism and patriarchy are responsible for violence against women. Physical and psychological violence can be found at any stage of a woman's life. In Pakistan feudal lords are involved in domestic violence such as physical abuse, rape, acid throwing, burning and killing (Sallaz 303). Majority of the victims, who suffered heavily, belong to the middle class.

While discussing *My Feudal Lord* Shree argues that in reality Khar is the by-product of feudalism and that women are mere commodities for the feudal lords (Shree 11). Sunday Times highlights that Tehmina Durrani, through her work, provides with a deep insight as to how vulnerable a woman's position is in the complicated society of Pakistan. Pakistani women suffer at the hands of inhuman traditions and biased laws. The act of violence or its threat can be seen anywhere unhindered by boundaries of wealth, race and culture. "The notion of being a woman should not be guided by the dictates of the patriarchal society". Elisha's thesis (2011) gives a hypothetical description of female moral liability: Emmanuel Levinas with Lucy Irigaray and Kristeva (Elisha 25).

Intersectional approaches are making headway across the social sciences. It can help us understand gender, sexuality, and religion as they intersect and interact with one another and related identities, statuses, and experiences such as race, class, nationality, and ability (Collins 41). Another scholar has made an argument for "complex religion,". It is an intersectional approach to religion that accounts for the ways it intersects with social statuses and the ways those social statuses intersect with one another. She focuses largely on race and class. Her approach can be just as readily applied to gender and sexuality, including how they intersect with race, class, religion, and other factors (Swindler 272).

### **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 paper adopts a qualitative research design and uses literary criticism as its method of inquiry. The primary source is Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*, which is analyzed through close reading to identify textual patterns of male domination, patriarchal discourse, and female marginalization. Dialogues, narrative descriptions, recurring motifs, and scenes of conflict are examined to understand how chauvinistic masculinity is constructed within the memoir. Because the study focuses on

representation, ideology, and interpretation, the qualitative approach is the most suitable. The analysis is guided by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's feminist perspective, especially her arguments concerning the silencing of women at the margins and the politics of representation (Morton; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"). Relevant textual material is gathered through repeated reading and note-taking and then organized into themes such as control of female speech, bodily violence, moral hypocrisy, maternal blackmail, and feudal authority. Secondary criticism is used to support the argument that Durrani's memoir is an important feminist intervention in the discourse of women's oppression and empowerment (Zaidi and Qureshi).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Male chauvinism in *My Feudal Lord* is represented as a systematic form of masculine entitlement. Mustafa Khar does not merely behave harshly; he acts from the assumption that authority over women belongs naturally to him. One of the clearest early examples of this is his attempt to regulate Tehmina's communication. When she speaks to her brother on the telephone, he reacts with suspicion and hostility: "Why did you speak to him for so long? Is he your brother or your lover?" (Durrani 133). When she responds, he escalates the situation with, "**Are you answering me back?**" (Durrani 133). These lines illustrate that patriarchal power is threatened not by wrongdoing, but by a woman's independent speech. In Spivakian terms, the woman's utterance is not received as valid explanation; it is treated as insubordination (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?").

The memoir repeatedly shows that male chauvinism is enforced through violence. Tehmina remarks that when words fail to secure obedience, "His fists did the talking" (Durrani 106). Elsewhere she describes a brutal assault:

"He pulled at my hair, thrusting my head from side to side... He threw me against a wall, picked me up and threw me against another one – again, and again, and again" (Durrani 102-03).

These scenes make clear that violence is not incidental; it is the physical language of patriarchy. The woman's body becomes the surface upon which male authority is inscribed. Spivak's framework clarifies the significance of this: the silencing of women is not only ideological but corporeal. Fear and bodily pain become tools for rendering the female subject mute.

Durrani links this violence directly to feudal power. She observes, "A feudal lord was an absolute ruler who could justify any action" (Durrani 41). This statement is crucial because it explains why male chauvinism in the memoir is inseparable from class and political privilege. Mustafa behaves not simply as a husband, but as a ruler whose will is law. The domestic sphere mirrors the feudal order: unquestioned authority at the top, submission below. In this structure, the wife is not treated as a partner but as a subject. Male chauvinism therefore gains institutional force from feudalism, which normalizes hierarchy and impunity.

Another striking feature of chauvinistic patriarchy in the memoir is its moral hypocrisy. Mustafa positions himself as the judge of women's conduct while exempting himself from moral scrutiny. Tehmina summarizes this unequal code:

"Feudal law allows a man to act in such a manner, but a wife becomes a sinner if she deceives her husband" (Durrani 51).

This statement captures the sexual double standard at the center of patriarchy. The man's misconduct is excusable because masculinity is aligned with privilege, whereas the woman's alleged transgression becomes a moral stain. Spivak's theory helps explain how such a system operates discursively: patriarchal law defines women before women can define themselves (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?").

The memoir also exposes how male chauvinism objectifies women. Mustafa identifies himself as predator, declaring, "**I am a shikari**" (Durrani 41). This metaphor reveals a worldview in which

women are prey to be pursued, possessed, and displayed. The same logic underlies the feudal expression “**Zar, Zan, Zameen,**” which places woman alongside money and land. Patriarchal desire is thus inseparable from possession. The woman is not encountered as an ethical equal; she is treated as territory. This commodifying impulse is one of the memoir’s strongest indictments of male chauvinism.

Public humiliation is another important mechanism of patriarchal control. Tehmina recalls:

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

Here, the punishment is both physical and symbolic. Patriarchy injures the body and simultaneously attacks the woman’s reputation. Resistance is redefined as shamelessness. Through such moments, Durrani reveals how male chauvinism depends not only on private violence but also on the social production of female shame. Spivak’s claim that subaltern women suffer within structures that deny them full audibility becomes especially relevant: patriarchal discourse has already labeled the woman before she can narrate her own experience (Spivak, “French Feminism in an International Frame” 165).

The memoir also demonstrates how male chauvinism thrives on female dependency. Mustafa taunts Tehmina with the impossibility of escape: “Where will you go, Tehmina? To your father’s? Your father won’t throw a bone to you” (Durrani 220). This line is chilling because it reveals the social logic behind domestic domination. A woman is kept within oppressive marriage not only by fear of the husband, but by fear of social homelessness. Patriarchy functions as a network: husband, family, honor, and stigma all reinforce one another. Spivak’s framework again helps here, because the subaltern woman’s inability to speak is linked not only to silencing by one man, but to wider structures that make meaningful dissent materially dangerous (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”). Perhaps the most painful expression of male chauvinism in the memoir lies in Mustafa’s use of the children as leverage. Tehmina is forced into an unbearable choice when he implies that the only path to reunion with her children is submission: “The only way out is for Tehmina to return to me” (Durrani 240). Patriarchy thus weaponizes motherhood. A woman’s emotional bond becomes a means of coercion. This dimension is especially important because it shows that male chauvinism does not stop at the wife’s body or reputation; it reaches into her maternal identity and turns love into captivity.

The memoir’s prison episode further reveals that Mustafa’s patriarchal authority extends beyond the home. Tehmina narrates:

“Mustafa’s eyes burned with anger... he commanded ‘Kholo’ (Open!).  
A frightened guard promptly opened the door and saluted” (Durrani 296).

This scene dramatizes the social reach of male power. The same man who terrorizes women domestically is obeyed institutionally. Patriarchy is therefore not a private deviation from public order; it is embedded within the very structures of public authority. Feudal masculinity enjoys not only household dominance but also state-like deference. Yet Durrani’s memoir does not end with patriarchal triumph. Its feminist force lies in the exposure and reversal of male symbolic power. Tehmina’s rejection of Khar’s identity is especially significant when she says that she “did not want to lean on a pillar that had fallen upon her instead of supporting her” (Durrani 374). The supposed male protector is revealed as the source of collapse. Her final assertion:

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

overturns the patriarchal order of naming and memory. The woman once denied voice becomes the narrator who redefines the man. From a Spivakian perspective, this transformation is central. Spivak

warns that the subaltern woman's speech is often blocked, misheard, or absorbed by dominant discourse. Durrani does not naively solve that problem, but she powerfully confronts it. By writing the memoir, she claims interpretive authority over a life that patriarchy had attempted to script for her. The memoir thus becomes an act of feminist counter-discourse. It names the structures of domination, exposes the violence hidden beneath public prestige, and refuses the silence upon which male chauvinism depends (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?").

### Conclusion

*My Feudal Lord* presents male chauvinism as a comprehensive structure of domination rooted in entitlement, violence, hypocrisy, and feudal privilege. Mustafa Khar is portrayed not merely as a cruel husband but as the embodiment of a patriarchal system that grants men authority over women's speech, bodies, and identities. Through Spivak's framework, the memoir may be read as a powerful account of how the female subject is silenced within dominant discourse and how that silence is challenged through narration. Durrani's memoir is therefore both a record of patriarchal violence and a literary act of feminist resistance.

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