

Towards Revelation: A Study of Women in Tehmina Durani's Blasphemy

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Abstract : This study of Wo/men in Tehmina Durani's Blasphemy attempts to bring forth women's consistent struggle for self-reliance as a rebel. How women caught between innate nature and patriarchal norms with its complex religion, tradition and modernity, suffer sexually, experience each and every incident consciously, and gain knowledge and rebels against patriarchal society to carve a distinct identity, individuality, and self-realisation.

IndexTerms - Revelation, rationality, self-assertion, identity and writing

"The sole way where wisdom lies;
Ordered one eternal plan:
Man must suffer to be wise.
Head winds heavy with past ill
Stray his course and cloud his heart
Sorrow takes the blind soul's part
Man grows wise against his will"

- Aeschylus, Agamemnon

In a phallocentric society, where cultural attributes, like myth, labels, gender persecution, religion and its orthodoxy, customs, norms are dominant over woman, woman suffers patiently being sensitive and with acute conscious, experiences life, with stands all the problems, without losing her confidence. She gains knowledge and seeks truth and realizes the reality pragmatically and strives to carve her identity, self, individuality, freedom and approaches life rationally amidst her oppression and exploitation like: "..... assert yourself, Don't suppress it, let it grow and flourish, destroys in the bargain"(Shashi Deshpande, Roots and Shadows p132).

With the arrival of Feminism in 1960's and subsequently gender studies, cultural constructs that have been rooted for centuries in human civilization have been reviewed and deconstructed. In modern era, women are realising their subordination and exploitation meted out to them from centuries. Women suffered were subjugated and oppressed in all the spheres dwelling in a patriarchal society which apparently is in tune with religion and culture. With the passage of time women have gained the knowledge, turned self-reliant from their nightmarish experiences which in fact paved way for awareness and increased their strength by suffering patiently. She is rediscovering her position, status, identity, liberty, equality and truth as a rebel against patriarchal society. This awakening of women is shaping for the future's new-world. Women's movements in the west gradually percolated and influenced nations like India, China, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and African nations. These women movements marked the women's open protest and war against their subordination, marginalization and exploitation and claim for equality, identity and liberty.

Tehmina Durani is one such woman writer from Pakistan who voiced through her novels. Durani's Blasphemy is set in an Islamic world, the story of Heer, the protagonist of the novel who is used as a mouthpiece to expose the distortion of Islam by religious leaders. Due to poverty Heer a minor girl is married in haste to a much older religious leader Pir Sain. Inside the haveli, she is bound by patriarchal norms, starting from sexual abuse to humiliation, black magic, rigid Islamic orthodoxy, child abuse, existing polygamy, Prostitution, barbaric assassinations and women's plight, fear, anxiety and subserveillance and Tara, Cheel, Heer, who rebel against the religion, patriarchal norms and end's with the death of Heer.

Tehmina Durani' Blasphemy is about a woman called Heer. Heer begins to realize the stark reality of living during the early years of her life. Living in a patriarchal society as a wife of Pir Sain, the religious leader, she experiences all kinds of vagaries, with her keen sensitivity. Even before her marriage, her name is attached with Pir Sain, making her to feel:

"I would be mistress of my own home and carry a husband's name. In my world that was more precious to a woman than anything she could achieve"(Tehmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 31)

After her marriage she begins to suffer more. She is exposed to inhumane and animated sexual exploitation by her own husband. Everyday she is prepared and decorated like lamb to be slaughtered at the temple, without her consent. Being very young girl, with fancies and romantic in her ideas, all her dreams get shattered. Her concept of love relationship between a man and woman gets buried under her burqa, in: "I realised that my concept of love was wrong. It had been so different. I had thought lovers followed each other and laughed, sang songs together like in the movies. I had seen, Nothing I had read or learnt in school was true.

Poets, passion, and love letters were all false, Liars, I cursed under my breath, they delude the young. The contrast between what I should have been and what it was too stark". (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy 42)

Heer is very sensitive to each and every experience. In the haveli, she begins to lead a cloistered life within the four walls of the court yard. During the day she is covered by purdah and at night in the clutches of Pir Sain. Being very new to the haveli and due to the existing class system she is debarred to speak with others. Hence, amidst hundreds of men she leads a secluded life. Her feelings and loneliness gets registered in: "The drapes were never dawn aside. The windows were never opened. It was always dark. There was no sign of day. The lights come on as soon as the early morning alarm struck" (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 44) Everyday Heer is assaulted sexually and forced to work during the day. No women have right to question any one and the master also. Though being the mistress of Haveli, in front of all workers, one day Heer is beaten to death by Pir Sain for her absence in the kitchen. As she observes: "I thought of my mother's paranoia, it seemed to be universal problem. A women's position always depended on a man, whether she was rich or poor did not matter. She always went from father to husband to son and I was at the second stage of his journey" (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 46)

For the first time in the novel we get a glimpse of Heer, growing and becoming a rational being. She is aware of each and every incident that happens in her day to day life. She compares her position with all other women of the haveli and feels unanimous with them. Her suffering makes her very strong mentally. After witnessing Kalli's death and other subjugation of servants at the haveli and also the living members within the haveli, Heer realizes that all tied under the same chain of the established order, for which Pir Sain is the master. She realizes the plight of common women whose position seems always seems deteriorating: "I fell into the established order but began to dread the monotony just as much as the unpredictability of it all. Every thing here was permanent, nothing could be changed. They did not required new methods, they just needed mother person to ensure continuity" (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 46) Once again, Heer, exhibits her rationality. She is not dead like other women folk of the Haveli, but ponders and anticipates a change in the orders and methods of routine life in the haveli. She not only works for her self-interest but also for the rest of the women in the haveli. But she finds none who could think like her reflecting what Beauvoir avers: "The daughter is for the mother at once her double and another person, the mother is at once overwhelmingly affectionate and hostile towards her daughter; she saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of proudly laying claim to her own femininity and also a way of revenging herself for it. The same process is to be found in pederasts, gamblers, drug – addicts in all who at once take pride in belonging to a certain confraternity, and feel humiliated by the association"(Simone de Beauvoir, n pag.)

Heer's sufferings continue relentlessly but she is not view as a human being. Pir Sain, who wears green coloured chaddar, scribbled ninety-nine names of Allah, holding holy heads, gives solutions to other peoples, but remains a brute and heinous womanizers with in the chaddar. At night he rapes her and during day beats her for minute mistakes. As a wife Heer believes in the existence of God. She yearns for a fellow human being to share her pains and feelings but finds none. Being alone and secluded, she questions God: "Was this hell? Was he entrusted by God to lift me up from a dirty alley, raise me to supremacy and reduce me to an insect? Was he God? Unpredictable and unaccountable?" (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 48)

As the sufferings, pains, physical inflictions, restlessness, mental unrest increases, Heer realizes the failure of married a life, for having married a Godly man who was considered as a direct descendant of God. Instead of relieving the people from their sins and problems and redeem them through spirituality, Pir Sain him self becomes the devil incarnate. In the above lines, it is clear that Heer is becoming more and more rationale, experiences bring more and more knowledge in her. First, she feels her dreams shattered, secondly, she gets a macrocosmic vision of women's plight as a wife, and later feels compassionate for the pathetic condition of the servants in the haveli. Heer questioning the religion and its leader, its orthodoxy and hypocrisy is a pointer to her maturing sensibility and thinking. Heer's realization of the women's subjugation and to she should cope with present situation and live, so that tomorrow women can fight when the time ripens. This rationale of hers and self-reliance to live under utter dismal position is reflects Durani's "Survival of fittest". She expresses her existential ideology that she should live through the present accepting Pir Sain's dictatorship so that tomorrow she could get a chance to give back or it would pave way for other women to fight patriarchy. She observes: "Survival meant avoiding master's wrath. Every body's loyalty was only to him" (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 51)

It is her sheer determination to live and courageously face the wrath for a good better future. Being an optimist she feels that if she survived today she could fight and accomplish her freedom. If Heer has to survive and exist as an authentic individual, she has to think and rebel and the best way to defend is to offend. As Heer says: "I realized that the suppressed derived strength from suppressing others. It helped them to accept their own imprisonment and was can easy occupation for the trapped" (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 51)

Heer begins to consolidate her courage, self-reliance and moral strength to fight against her oppressor Pir Sain, the patriarchal Incarnation. It is not only Heer, the sufferer and the victim, who realizes this. But there are others who felt the wrath of religion and it's orthodoxy, through Pir Sain, as Toti narrates: "They imposed their wishes as ideals into minds of people. They exploit our ignorance, our poverty, over loses and our limitations to rule over us. The shrine is mercenary and political, it is no holy" (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 88) Further, SakiBibi's accusation over the loss of her child substantiates the same issue further. She observes: "Groves cannot bestow life, Nor can men who Fleece the poor and oppress the meet reach God"(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 107).

Heer finds other suffering men, with whom she tries comment herself and realizes that the heinous crimes and brutality of religion and it's men are only metted out the common people through the disguise of a holy man. She observes: "A parasite nibbling on the holy Book, he was Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night. He was Bhai's destroyer,

Amma Sain's tormentor. He had humbled Ma. Exploited people. He was the rapist of Orphans and the fiend that fed on the weak. But over and above all this, he was known to be the man closest to attach the cone who could reach him and same us"(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 143)

Heer realizes her hapless position is almost alike to the other women of the haveli. She inertly begins to love other members like Cheel, Kaali, Yathimiri, Widow's two daughters, Saki Bibi, and Toti. Heer is growing conscious and knowingly and or unknowingly begins to associate her self with the oppressed and feels an affinity to them. Subjected to the prostitution by Pir Sain, HEER realizes the breakthrough to her sexual exploitation as: "I noticed two black spiders mating on the floor..... The thought of collecting pairs of insects for Pir Sain's pleasure made me giggle, even as tried. The spider wiggled out from under its mate and ran away. Suddenly it turned, charged back, and stung it's unsuspecting partner to death. When its victim flopped upside down, the black widow spider raced away on a hundred legs"(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 169)

This symbolic reference to the mating of the spiders metonymically represents her mating with Pir Sain. Having suffered so far, Heer now begins to contemplate and aspires for Pir Sain's death, so that she can free her and other women from the brutal clutches of her husband. In her desperation and pains she prays for Pir Sains' death as: "Free us from Satan, Allah, Free us like our prophet freed the people of Mecca from the curse of Jahalia. Awaken us. Tell them you need no envoy. Restore my faith. Take him away take him up. I cried" (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 171)

Comprehending the situation, torment, and stark reality, Heer prays to Allah to bestow death on Pir Sain so that everyone could be released and after a long duration of suffering. With her practical knowledge of reality, she musters the courage to aspire for the death of Pir Sain. Further, it shows her confidence and self determined mind to rebel against the existing patriarchal setup. Heer contemplates the death of Pir Sain, very often. She transforms herself from a sullen, fear and grief stricken, poor woman into a courageous brave woman to withstand the onslaught and face the world. Her prayer:

"Transforming myself from a slave to master my own destiny needed miracle.
Pir Sain was a symbol of munafiqat.
I was a solider.
This was a jihad.
In my eyes, the only thing happening here according to the injunctions of Islam was about to happen now. The only thing to rule in the name of Allah was PirSain's death"(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 181)

Shows the growth on the part of Heer from a innocent girl into a brave, and bold woman who can stand for the cause of good of human beings in the world.

After the death of PirSain, Heer the self-reliant woman, with confidence and knowledge, discards her old position and the institution of marriage; which subjugated and exploited the women of haveli to death. She condemns the idea of marriage as a God's knot, which is very hard to digest, but she claims her freedom from that prison: "Now they must be dispersing my contract had terminated. PirSain was gone, but it was an idea hard to get used to"(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 17)

Heer, being inertly wise and brave, begins to restore the energy for the future mission. So far, she has lived within the four walls, forcibly maintaining distance from the rest of the womenfolk of the haveli. But the neo-woman, Heer, whole heartedly turns compassionate to poor women and collects women for the future fight. She begins to love all other women in spite of their differences. Heer realizes that unless and until the opportune hour arrives, one has to wait. She observes: "One day when it will be possible for women to love not in her weakness but in her strength, not to escape herself but to find herself –on that day love will become for her, as for men, a source of life and not of mortal danger"(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, n pag)

Heer collects women like Yathimiri, Cheel, Tara, Widow and Dia in her mission to fight against the demonic, patriarchal orthodox and social set up. She makes Tara to realize the hard reality of their living condition: "We are bonded together in suffering, you and I we are captive of a false and evil system. A poisonous octopus grips us. It's tentacles usurped the strength of Islam to exploit us in every possible way. Its grip tightens but never lets us die"(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 195) Heer becomes one among them and makes them to realise their dismal position.

In spite of the threat to their lives, Heer proposes her mission to Tara. Heer is determined enough to rebel, but not radically, yet rationally to expose the evils of haveli and its men. She exposes haveli and the obnoxious ways of Pir Sain: "The shrine is a symbol of all exploitation. If men can use Allah against the weak, all other men can use Allah against the weak, all other means are lesser and easier to exploit. If we make war against this shrine, every truth will be served"(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 196)

Heer and Tara prepare a plan and set an aim to shatter the myth of Pir Sain and his haveli. The Holy Shrine which has been a place of women molestation makes Heer to speak with determination: "Hurdles come in the way of every great mission. If you turn from the future, you only run into the past"(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 199)

Heer and Tara unveil the burqa where they shuddered in, walk on the streets at night and expose the heinous deeds conducted behind the shrine, inside the haveli, the brutal murders, prostitution, and obnoxious blue films and so forth. She exposes herself as Heer, the mistress of haveli and the wife of Holy man, Pir Sain. Shealso says she is nothing but Piyari, a city whore with whom many have spent their nights. Heer's hidden strength lies in her pious will and chastity of her mind. She prays to God:

“O Allah, my morality serves nothing my person means nothing. Allow me to use myself to expose the evil this shrine conceals behind your name. Allow me to take course that will condemn me but expose the distortion of your message at the hands of your enemies”(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 197)

Heer prepares herself to face the future problems for the sake of women folk and common men, who suffer and accept every thing in the name of God, which in turn are heinous and false. She even expresses her will which is committed to sacrifice herself for the betterment of people. Heer, like a martyr is ready to sacrifice herself and also at the cost of her son and other kith-kin's who are rooted in Blasphemy, evil, crimes and sin she thunders: “My son is a link in a satanic chain, why do you expect him to adhere to Allah's will? Which law of Islam is observed here that this one should not be broken? This is not the only sin, nor is it worst. Let the myth shatter and the filth spill over”(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 208)

Further she betrays the reign of Rajaji, who admonishes her mother as mad and a whore. At that point she explodes the hard indigestible truth, attacking directly the myths, labels and gender persecution that are false and unholy which are imposed on women in the name of religion: “The woman you course was born in your shrine, not in a mother's womb. I pleased your father beyond my duty. I owe nobody here”(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 206)

Heer shatters the cultural and orthodox constructs which are forced on a woman by the patriarchal setup. Heer releases herself from the tentacles of the family, religion, customs, norms, vicarious sexuality, dogmas, myths, taboos and labels. etc. of a phallocentric society. She realizes her 'self', carves her own identity very rationally without any blood shed. She gets her strength and revives her moral courage being patient and suffering all atrocitie. Having awareness of each incident she gains the real knowledge from lived experiences. Heer feels free like a natural human being like a river growing inertly, having faith in the self and God, who is beyond the religion and rituals. This is registered in:

‘Humanity recognizes on sin; virtue recognizes no sex; mind recognizes no sex; Life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognize no sex. Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him, she possesses physical and mental and moral powers like him she has to pay the penalty for disobeying nature's laws, and for greater penalties has she to suffer from ignorance like him she enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not equal.” (Michel Foucault, n pag)

Heer's emancipated individual self, devoid of all cultural constructs, and in being an independent free woman narrates to her daughter to learn from her own life. In fact Heer serves as a paradigm for her daughter and other women in: “Learn to cope with your own lives. You have been through nothing yourself, yet you bleat like sheep. You are the daughters of woman who lives the aftermath of her husband's life” (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 207)

It clearly depicts the individuality of Heer. She advises her daughter to grow like a natural girl and not in accordance to the patriarchal norms of the society. Her daughter has to learn by herself, because no one can impose anything on an independent person, if each individual believes in himself. She asks her to learn by herself in: “Women are seeking their own image of themselves nurtured from within rather than imposed from without” (Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, npag)

After suffering a lot, Heer the individuated woman dies. One year later, Heer observes on her tomb, written in black colour “HEER”, as a mark of blasphemy like the Scarlet letter 'A' on Hester Prynne's cloth, symbolically referring to 'Adultery', She also listens to the prayer: “O Allah, bless this soul for exposing the decadence of Shrine – worship. Bless her for bringing us closer to you”(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 229)

She cries for the birth of another shrine. Society is so strong that one person cannot remove the filth and clean the society. But, Heer grows as an individual, elevates self, carving her own identity.

In the phallocentric society, one come across people like Hee rarel, who fights for a better society. People like Heer will carve the identity, individuality, leaving the rest to follow her and their own path. Through people like Heer the whole society hopes that many more Heers are to follow. Heer sacrificed herself for the sake of common people, to restore nature's law, and turned almost a martyr, leaving others to commit themselves to a noble cause:

“But the past prevailed,

The present could not break through”(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 19)

Woman in a patriarchal society with its immense hegemony over woman is led to suffer more. Due to the cultural barricades, discriminations, hazards, violence, gender persecutions, religious myths, labels assigned to women, they have subordinated and exploited to the core. Under patriarchal societies women are normally marginalized and lead a cloistered and secluded life, like an angel with in the walls. She is imprisoned socially, economically, politically, religiously etc, and restrained her from exercising her freedom. For such women, writing serves as a vent to imprint her feelings, sufferings, subjugation and feminine sensibilities.

In any writing and gender gender cultural construct intermingles very often. In Blasphemy, Heer takes recourse to imaginary letter writing to give vent for her hidden feelings, experiences; to deconstruct the cultural and orthodoxal construct and to express her pure love as wel. Take a look at the letter written by Heer:

“My dearest Heer,
I can not meet you at the cost
Desire that it marks the purity of
My love. Your life is under threat
You challenge the Shrine
.....

.....
 Nothing can change our
 Circumstances.
 Except, if you become some one
 Else
 Some one else”(Techmina Durani, Blasphemy, p 222)

Heer registers her feminine sensibility and expresses her wish to become an independent woman and she also expresses her first and pure love which is never expressed before by her or told to any one, even to her lover Ranjah.

Hence, writing has become the weapon to deconstruct the patriarchal structure, to register women's unheard and untold feelings, invisible aspirations and wishes etc. A woman does not write the mere experiences but also writes herself. It is not a vigorous struggle but a woman writing for women's self-realization, independence and freedom. She feels solaced in seclusion with pen and simultaneously she creates a new world. Woman by writing is rewriting her history and also claims her distinct identity and status. In writing something a woman invariably writes her/self.

Revelation is not something Divine's incarnation, but a self- realization of a woman and a rationale march towards her freedom. Woman's vision of new life, identity, freedom, equality is not merely an external emancipation but her inner elevation also. Thus Tehmina Durani's Heer stands as testimony for such revelation of woman. In the fourth chapter entitled "Revelation" attempts to portray the chaotic world of men and women. Literature brings life into focus and enables one to view in a different way. Women move from the position of ambiguous and oppressed state to an unambiguous with self-realization and individual identity.

Patriarchal society with its cultural and religious norms have subordinated and exploited women from centuries. Women like Heer, Tara and Cheel who accept the domination use the same domination to gain knowledge, realize their othering as a cultural construct. Heer and Tara assert themselves clearing the veil of patriarchal / cloistered life, move out the patriarchal hegemony. They deconstruct patriarchal notion about women's sexuality and with the strength of conviction assert their sexuality, womanhood sex. Thus Techmina Durani, Blasphemy attempts to portray the chaotic world of men and women. Literature brings life into focus and enables one to view in a different way. Women move from the position of ambiguous and oppressed state to an unambiguous with self-realization and individual identity.

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