



**CULTURAL OPPRESSION AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN *MY FEUDAL LORD*:
A CULTURAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS**

Ghania Maham

M.Phil Scholar, the University of Faisalabad

2024-mphil-el-031@tuf.edu.pk

Dr. Rabia Khan, (Corresponding Author)

Assistant Professor, The University of Faisalabad

rabiakhan.ENG@tuf.edu.pk

Abstract

This study explores the deep rooted problem of domestic violence through cultural feminism's perspective in the autobiographical novel, My Feudal Lord, by Tehmina Durrani. Cultural feminism focuses on the importance of traditions, values, and social rules in the formation of the gender identities and powers. This novel is an excellent portrayal of emotional, physical, and psychological abuse, which mirrors the cultural and patriarchal structures that accommodate domestic violence in South Asian cultures, particularly in Pakistan. The prevalence of this abuse can be attributed to our deep-rooted cultural values and the persecution of women's voices, which are upheld by their family and societal pressures. The proposed study will contribute to the feminist literature because it will provide a critique that highlights these silences, and create dissonance in the social structures that facilitate oppression; thus breaking it. The study shows the necessity of critical awareness and a cultural change through the process of uncovering the cultural expectations, which silences female resistance and voice. By using a textual analysis and theoretical basis, it strives to add to the discourse surrounding gender, power, and violence in Pakistani literature to integrate feminist advocacy in the world at large.

Keywords: domestic violence, cultural feminism, patriarchy, Pakistani literature, feudalism, gender oppression, women's rights

Introduction

“Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women...” **The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, General Assembly Resolution, December 1993.**

Violence such as physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and domestic violence is a problem permanently existing locally and globally as a result of aggression and abuse of power. It usually entails the aspect of controlling a person in a relationship through physical, emotional or psychological violence. It is common in the patriarchal society where women are often victimized because of power (Anderson, 2017). Therefore, everything about an individual's today is shaped by the culture that he or she grows in and experiences through learning of cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors. Culture decides definitions and descriptions of normality and psychopathology of any society. Culture of the certain society helps us to understand that society's view, population, and their perception and process of sexual acts and sexual violence (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). Women especially as wives are frequent victims of domestic violence as a result of power differences and submissiveness. Emotional and psychological violence is sometimes invisible and therefore women end up tolerating it and adapting themselves (Kasthuriarachchige, 2024).

Cultural feminists have reasserted femaleness by questioning the patriarchal ideologies, encouraging pacifism, cooperation and non-violence, challenge passivity and invisibility of



women in society and change the governing process (Wolff, 2007). The importance of this has been further emphasized by recent sociocultural literature like Zafar et al. (2023) and Akram (2021) who are showing how cultural norms and household-level traditions perpetuate gender-based violence in Pakistan (Akram, 2021; Zafar et al., 2023).

Domestic stereotyping is the violation of global human rights but at the same time in patriarchal societies such as Pakistan; this is even enhanced by the cultural, religious and feudalisms' biases. *My Feudal Lord* (1991) by Tehmina Durrani reveals the harsh truth of women being abused by their partners in position of high politics and social class ownership. Being an autobiographical work, the novel throws light on the way of gendered cultural expectations, honor-based approaches and normalization of male supremacy which start to influence the encounter of a domestic violence faced by a woman. Through the perspective of cultural feminism, which examines the establishment and perpetuation of gender roles with the help of cultural standards, this study demonstrates that how entrenched patriarchal domination is. Tehmina, the main character of the novel, is not only a victim but also a cultural icon of repressed womanhood in the context of whom the transition from silence to a voice reflects a struggle experienced by society as a whole. This paper examines the ways of oppression and possible sources of resistance by examining the narrative construction, major events, and characters through the lens of the theoretical approach of cultural feminism. With this, it adds to the scholarship of the gendered violence discourse in South Asian literature and raises awareness of the need of cultural change and gender justice.

Problem statement

In Pakistan, domestic violence persists regardless of legal developments because it is supported by culture and patriarchy. This is what happens in form of reality in *My Feudal Lord* by Tehmina Durrani but this novel has never been theorized as such in cultural feminist terms. This paper focuses on the larger cultural problem of normalization of domestic abuse that must be addressed by academic and societal means.

Research objectives

1. To see how domestic violence is depicted in *My Feudal Lord* by using cultural symbols and gender roles.
2. To examine how patriarchal and feudal systems continued to propagate the suppression of women.
3. To investigate how cultural feminism may provide both interpretive and transformative means of reflecting on as well as combating the domestic violence.

Research questions

1. How does *My Feudal Lord* correspond to the cultural norms and gender expectations as a form of domestic violence?
2. How do patriarchy and feudalism propagate abuse systems?
3. In what sense can cultural feminism give a powerful framework of reading and fighting domestic violence both in literature and reality?

Significance of the Study

This paper provides a new view that examines the application of cultural feminism to a key South Asian feminist work. Not only does it address a gap in the scholarly field but also creates cultural awareness demonstrating how normalized traditions allow abuse to happen. The study is also very important as far as feminist literary research, gender research, and policy advocacy are concerned. This paper adds to the current knowledge on how literature can be used to effect



social change by reading the story of Tehmina Durrani in her autobiographical work *My Feudal Lord* through cultural feminism and placing the domestic violence within the cultural literal and metaphorical identity and expression. Such studies as that by Akram (2021) and Zafar et al. (2023) underline how deeply rooted household and cultural-level issues within Pakistani society resulted in making women tolerate domestic abuse (Akram, 2021; Zafar et al., 2023), which is why this literary investigation should be seen as culturally relevant.

Literature review

Violence against women and girls, including physical, psychological, sexual, and economic aspects, is an extensive violation of human rights, a concern of most women of different groups and a problem in every country (Kapoor, 2000). The WHO has released a report on intimate partner violence and produced early findings based on 24,000 women in 10 countries. It provides 15 suggestions to increase national responsibility and measures, such as the advancement of primary measures, education, empowerment of the health reaction, help of women experiencing violence, and collaboration (Organization, 2005). This article reveals domestic violence problem in Pakistan, which is why there should be more education, empowerment, and anti-dowry, alcohol, and oppressed autonomy law to address the issue of a low-income country (Ali & Khan, 2007).

Cultural feminism is a feminist movement, which emphasizes on the social status of women and gender variations. It developed in the 1970s to minimize the gaps between males and females, and it fosters androgyny. Cultural feminism is an affirmation of feminine values against masculine, not a destruction of masculine power. It alters the lesbian feminism to emphasize female bonding as an emotional non-sexual connection (Wolff, 2007). Balsamo (1991) elaborates further on feminist discourse by stating that gender is not merely a social construct but also a creation of cultural practices and representation systems of which strengthens the cultural feminist premise of this paper (Balsamo, 1991).

This paper illuminates the interconnection between feminism and cultural studies in Asia and compares the Western and Indian experiences and the role of exceptionalism on the modernity of women (Niranjana, 2007). *Feminism and Cultural Studies* by Elizabeth Long establishes a basis of applying feminist views into culture analysis by showing relevance of cultural analysis to understand gendered experience (Long, 1989).

This paper exposes how structural inequality, income, and educational level are connected to the various incidence of domestic violence, thus posing a need to conduct future research incorporating family violence and feminist ideologies (Anderson, 2017). Sexual violence, non-sexual violence and sexual violence continues to be an international concern that is caused by power disparities, cultural values, and gender roles. Incidence mostly happens when cultures propagate male supremacy and social inferiority (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). In this paper, the laws of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, No.34 of 2005, will be analyzed with the application of liberal and the third world feminism. It brings out the gender-free nature of the Act, and yet its realization is discrimination against women in most instances (Kasthuriarachchige, 2024).

This study examines the social-cultural reasons behind the issue of domestic violence against women in Pakistan and brings out the complexity of the problem. It indicates cultural reforms, banning of traditional marriages, improving religious education, law reforms, and more women employments are point of discussion (Zafar et al., 2023). The research indicates that women in Pakistan accept domestic violence due to their socioeconomic factors, including



education, awareness, and financial status. However, women within a family, being married and having children is more acceptable towards the domestic violence (Akram, 2021). Domestic violence is a universal problem impacting social structure, law enforcement, health care, and work capabilities. It is pervasive, entrenched and it affects the health of women. It is very expensive, and yet it is often overlooked or poorly comprehended (Kaur & Garg, 2008).

This study investigates the economic reasons and consequences of the rising rates of violence against women in Pakistan both in terms of patriarchal culture that is still impervious and due to the sharp rise in unemployment under COVID-19 lockdown conditions. It proposes in-depth studies and policy changes in minimizing domestic and structural patriarchy, and in helping women operate in a more inclusive society (Memon et al., 2022).

This paper is an analysis of an autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord* by Tehmina Durrani and it explores the cultural and gender construction of women that results in their exploitation and subordination in traditional communities (Kaur, 2016). The research will discuss the acts of women in the Pakistani culture and how they were repressed in the Punjabi feudal system. It criticizes the structure of the Pakistani patriarchal society and also criticizes how women are treated unfairly and how they need to change it (Khan et al., 2021).

My Feudal Lord by Tehmina Durrani highlights the struggle between the male and female in Pakistani culture, tells the story of the narrator and her relationship with her husband and their contrast of desires. The study gives us the vulnerability of masculinity and femininity, the vulnerability of social polarities (Salman & Rasool, 2023).

Research methodology

Research design

The research methodology technique utilized in this study is a qualitative methodology because it is an effective technique to create a critical reflection of social realities inherent in literary texts in the context of existing theoretical paradigms. The qualitative approach will make it possible to analyze language, ideology, power structures, and cultural norms interpreting how they contribute to domestic violence and gender hierarchies. This research, therefore, falls within the domain of feminist literary criticism, especially, cultural feminism, to highlight the patriarchal structures of embeddedness and resistance on the part of women within socio-political structures. The research is trying to address the means through which gendered oppression is constructed and subverted by using close reading and theoretical contextualization.

Theoretical framework

Ideology of the Cultural Feminism

Cultural feminism focuses on gender distinctions between the two sexes to get a chance to understand women's social positions in a society. Feminism of this sort focuses on reinterpretation of femininity and masculinity, on recognizing and developing women centered society and individual women's liberation, and the latter through the process of personal transformation. Women's social inferiority is based on essentialist interpretations of male and female differences in cultural feminism (Wolff, 2007).

The field of cultural studies has developed historically due to the influence of American post-modernity and Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in England. Feminist cultural studies are a post-disciplinary endeavor that has been informed by early feminist studies, and the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies. It has a variety of theorists, scholars, and practices discussing gender, culture, power and representation.



This study examines cultural feminism, which is a thought pattern used to reject the suppression of the cultural expressions and knowledge bases of women in patriarchal societies. It focuses on the life and ethical thinking of women along with their shared identity. Anne Balsamo (1991) investigates the applied cultural studies in terms of shaping knowledge and identity with respect to gendered narratives and technologies. Cultural feminism is a theoretical and political method of questioning patriarchal structures in symbolic and discursive actions (Balsamo, 1991). Kasthuriarachchige (2024) brings up faults to legislations that address domestic violence and the issues in question; it points out cultural misalignment, as well as hegemony related to South Asia, and suggests acting in favor of cultural feminism (Kasthuriarachchige, 2024).

According to the argument of cultural feminist theory models, gender subordination is based on the culturally created aesthetic norms and conventions that encourage female subordination. *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf is a critique of these standards, and how the patriarchal standards are shaping the bodies of women and their behavior, and it is important to adopt feminist criticism towards these discourses being expressed in cultures (Wolff, 2007).

Equally, Zafar (2023) also makes a culturally grounded feminist construct to the debate such as the way Muslim women identities and resistances have to be interpreted under particular cultural, historical and religious settings. She specifically highlights voice and self-expression and negotiation in patriarchy, both of which cultural feminism is linked with in its construction of particularized agency as opposed to universalized analyses of emancipation (Zafar et al., 2023).

Alongside other secondary critics of this study like Chris Weedon (1997), the poststructuralism presentation of subjectivity and power is very helpful because it is believed to be part of the current movement and identification of the construction of identities is not based on fixation but rather on the constructionality of discoursing and culture, which similarly supplements the cultural feminism presented by the argument that womanhood is socially construed. Similarly, the works by Angela McRobbie (1984) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) add to the understanding of how media, education, legacies of colonialism and class further construct the structure of female identity and agency, the functions of which are only secondary to this study. Notably, Long (1989) holds that cultural meaning cannot be passively received but constituted through everyday social practices, highlighting, once again, the cultural feminist theme of how women subvert and transform their play in patriarchal environments (Long, 1989).

All in all, this framework can be read into the fine pattern of female subjectivity, resistance and exposure to a cultural context where patriarchy is open and hidden, structural and representational. Cultural feminism offers the critical language and thought to question the cultural construction, reproduction and sometimes, challenge the role of women, the experience and their representation in a system that propagates gendered hierarchy.

Textual analysis in the lens of Cultural feminism

My Feudal Lord by Tehmina Durrani reveals the essence of gender oppression as systemic within the Pakistani feudal society and it critiques the Patriarchal hold and redeems the female body, voice, and agency through the lens of cultural feminism.



Cultural and Patriarchal Embeddedness

The story brings out how women are made to live their tradition of being wives of their feudal husbands as inferior and quiet. As a political and patriarchal leader, Mustafa Khar has created an order where a male dominance is supreme and should not be doubted under any circumstances. Durrani writes, *“I was not a person in his eyes, just a woman who had to fulfill her duties as defined by him”* (Ch. 6) she again said: *“I was being beaten into silence, stripped of dignity, and made to believe that I deserved it.”* (Ch. 12) that encapsulates the way culture codes reinforce strict gender roles. This type of cultural scripts, as Naomi Wolf (1991) asserts, helps to enforce power over female bodies and lives under the guise of the oppressive power as the normative force of the society (Wolff, 2007).

Domestic Violence as Cultural Practice

Using both physical and psychological abuse, Mustafa exerts authority not just as a person but rather as a representative of societally validated masculinity. Durrani narrates: *“The slaps, punches, and verbal assaults were part of my daily routine... I was his most convenient target”* (Ch. 10). Cultural Feminism’s perspective understands this violence as a cultural system of instilling order by punishing women and establishing the power of men (Kasthuriarachchige, 2024). Moreover, the society has cultural taboos on divorce and honor that keep women tongue tied: *“Divorce would have branded me a disgrace... a woman who failed to keep her husband happy”* (Ch. 11). According to Zafar, (2023), the South Asian cultural traditions tend to promote female silence as a virtue, which discourages opposition (Zafar et al., 2023).

Suppression of Female Subjectivity

The loss of autonomy by Durrani indicates the destruction of female subjectivity in the patriarchal cultures: *“I had become his shadow—an appendage... My life was not mine anymore”* (Ch. 7). Balsamo (1991) insists that, cultural feminism prioritizes subjective knowledge and social identities of women and autobiography serves as a stage to rediscover the lost voices and to reinscribe female agency (Balsamo, 1991).

Cultural Justification for Objectification

The fact that Durrani describes her body as an object that pleases men is representative of feudal-patriarchal culture of using women as their property: *“To him, I was nothing more than a plaything... I was his property”* (Ch. 8). Arranged marriages and beauty expectations form part of the cultural elements that end up reinforcing such objectification. The cultural feminist intellectuals take this as the effect of male-oriented cultural value systems under which women bodies are marketed products (Balsamo, 1991; Wolff, 2007).

Normalization of Violence and Cultural Endurance

Women are brought up on the idea to support male anger as a norm and what they have to endure as something essential: *“I was told to be patient... My pain was insignificant compared to a man's honor”* (Ch. 9) Durrani again said: *“I had learned to live in silence, for silence was safer than truth.”* (Ch. 22). According to Long (1989), cultural meaning, created by practices in everyday life reinforces patriarchal behavior and cultural feminism contradicts this normalization and demands the breakdown of ideologies through which violence is fostered (Long, 1989).

Resistance and Narrative Reclamation

By writing *My Feudal Lord*, the author makes an active effort to form resistance by turning personal trauma into social commentary: *“I had to break the silence. I had to tell the world*



what he had done to me." (Ch. 34). In recognition of this intention of the voice, cultural feminism is especially concerned with such recapture to rework patriarchal cultural discourses (Kasthuriarachchige, 2024; Zafar et al., 2023). With the help of her narrative, Durrani breaks the silence of feudal systems of honor and enables other women to address the abuse as normal.

Conclusion

Viewing *My Feudal Lord* through the prism of cultural feminism proves that gender roles are being exploited on a patriarchal level, domestic violence is used to support the cultural norms, and female autonomy is stamped out. The cultural feminism approach of focusing on culture and symbolic oppression of women is a holistic concept that can be used to question the social systems which occur in Durrani's narrative. The discussion expands feminist understanding of women lived experiences and subjectivities and helps to further propagate feminist discourse by suggesting changes that will bring about cultural change and social justice.

References:

- Akram, N. (2021). Household factors forcing women to accept domestic violence in Pakistan. *Violence and gender*, 8(4), 208-217.
- Ali, T. S., & Khan, N. (2007). Strategies and recommendations for prevention and control of domestic violence against women in Pakistan. *Journal of Pakistan Medical Association*, 57(1), 27.
- Anderson, K. L. (2017). Gender, status, and domestic violence: An integration of feminist and family violence approaches. In *Domestic violence* (pp. 263-277). Routledge.
- Balsamo, A. (1991). Feminism and cultural studies. *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 24(1), 50-73.
- Kalra, G., & Bhugra, D. (2013). Sexual violence against women: Understanding cross-cultural intersections. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 55(3), 244-249.
- Kapoor, S. (2000). Domestic violence against women and girls.
- Kasthuriarachchige, C. I. (2024). Reviewing the Efficiency and Reality of Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, No. 34 of 2005 Through the Lens of Feminist Perspectives.
- Kaur, R. (2016). Subversing the cultural and gender norms: Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal lord*. *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 3(1), 130-134.
- Kaur, R., & Garg, S. (2008). Addressing domestic violence against women: An unfinished agenda. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 33(2), 73-76.
- Khan, M., Khattak, S., Riaz, S., Sharif, M. M., & Ahmad, K. (2021). Women Spaces in Patriarchal Society: A Critique on Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(9).
- Long, E. (1989). Cultural studies: Feminism and cultural studies.
- Memon, A., Kamal, M., Aijaz, U., & Ali, S. (2022). A Marxist Feminist Approach To Violence Against Women During COVID-19 Pandemic In Pakistan. *Webology*, 19(3).
- Niranjana, T. (2007). Feminism and cultural studies in Asia. *Interventions*, 9(2), 209-218.
- Organization, W. H. (2005). WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women: summary report of initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women's responses. In *WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women: summary report of initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women's responses*.



- Salman, S., & Rasool, S. H. (2023). Trajectories of masculinity and femininity in Tehmina Durrani's autobiographical narrative, My Feudal Lord. *University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 7(II), 113-120.
- Wolff, K. (2007). Cultural feminism. *The Blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*.
- Zafar, Z., Jafar, M. M., Mahsud, N. K., Latif, A., Iqbal, N., & Islam, M. (2023). Socio-Cultural Determinants of Domestic Violence against Women: A Case Study of Pakistan. *Arbor*.