

**THE ECHOES OF EXISTENTIALISM IN TEHMINA DURRANI'S MY FEUDAL LORD****Zarneen Arzoo**

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**Abstract:**

This paper aims to critically analyse the echoes of existentialism in the autobiography of Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* (1994). It explores how a woman's true essence is undermined and how being made to live as an object causes her to feel alienated, dissatisfied and going through an existential crisis. It further attempts to show the delicate existence of Tehmina Durrani (a Muslim girl) who emerged with a strong existence that was given a place of dust and rubble by the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society. The selected text has been explored through the lens of Existentialist feminism in the light of Simone de Beauvoir's theory as explained in her revolutionary work, *The Second Sex* (2009).

**Keywords:** Existentialist feminism, Patriarchy, Feudal society, Oppression, Freedom and Choice.

**Introduction:**

Women are the best creations of God in this world. They are full of femininity and feminine characteristics. They are beautiful, attractive, charming, sensitive, and caring, it does not take long for their male counterpart to forcefully subjugate and suppress them, and become the suppressor of their identities. They have a feeling of a choked and shattered existence. Their choked existence is not bearable to them, and they started raising their voices against their subjugation and existence. This raised voice against their subjugation was termed as feminism. Feminism is an ideology of women's liberation, supported by every approach that suggests women endure injustice due to their sexual orientation. This movement started because women were discriminated against in society and were always seen as the second sex. It creates awareness among women about their identity and their desire to uproot the hierarchies that damaged women's positions and encouraged slavery and exploitation of them because they are capable of achieving their place in society, they are not weak human beings

**Methodology:**

Tehmina Durrani's autobiography, *My Feudal Lord*, has been analysed using a qualitative methodology. The study is conducted using Simon De Beauviour's theory of existential feminism through her revolutionary text *The Second Sex* (2009) as a framework.

**Existentialism and Feminist Perspective:**

Existentialists investigate the meaning and purpose of human existence and underline the importance of individual experience and freedom of choice in an uncertain world. They disbelieve in the existence of a universal set of laws or predestined rules for human beings. Rather, they contend that our choices and actions define our identity. "Men are condemned to be free because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre 05). Sartre further states, "Existentialism is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms

that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity” (18). Existentialist feminism emphasises individual freedom, choice and responsibility concerning gender and sexuality by combining feminist theory with existentialist philosophy. Despite cultural expectations and patriarchal conventions, it aims to encourage women and non-binary individuals to find their own identity and significance in life.

Regarding existentialist feminism, Simone De Beauvoir adopts Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of “existence precedes essence” (Sartre 26), stressing individual freedom and choice, "Freedom is the fundamental condition for the rise of consciousness" (Beauvoir 799). Examines the meaningfulness of the existence of women; posing the general concern of what it means to be a woman as an individual, her idea, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 330) demonstrates a woman's existence is not predetermined in any manner. Women have the same freedom to govern their lives as men have, yet some socially constructed structures in society only see 'woman' as the 'other,' the antithesis of ‘man.’ This othering leads to existential crisis, alienation and absurdity.

She further says women are always constructed by men, through patriarchal systems and institutions and they present men as subjects and women as objects in this world, existentialism is possible when a woman refuses to be an object and instead becomes a subject “Women can also be subjects, can be involved in positive activities in society. So that there is no more that can prevent women from building themselves and women can be creatures who have the essence and nature not underestimated” (Beauvoir 23). Therefore, a woman must make decisions and act considering that she is an autonomous individual in handling her own life. In other words, Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes that a woman must become who she wants to be and have the opportunity to determine her own destiny, subjectivity, freedom and choice.

#### **Tehmina Durrani and Existentialist connection in writing:**

Tehmina Durrani is the most popular writer and activist in Pakistan. She was born into one of the most powerful families in Pakistan. Her father, Shakirullah U. Durrani, served as the former chairman of Pakistan International Airlines and the governor of the State Bank of Pakistan. Her mother, Samina, is from the Hayat family of the Khattar tribe. She married Anees Khan a National Airlines junior executive in Pakistani Shipping Corporation at a relatively young age. She chooses to write her books about the harsh treatment of women in Pakistan after divorcing Mustafa Khar, her second husband the ex-Chief Minister and the ex-Governor of Pakistani Punjab.

In her autobiography *My Feudal Lord*, she highlighted the ethical and dogmatic precepts of Pakistani culture and screamed out at her psychological struggles and personal inconsistencies. The story revealed startling new perspectives on the vulnerable situations faced by women trapped in the complex web of Muslim society. It opens the readers' eyes wide, touches their hearts, and surprises them towards independence and autonomy, which are the rights of every woman by weaving the narratives of existentialism. The study aims to demolish the female stereotype as submissive, modest, obedient, frail, and weak, and replace it with a powerful, assertive, outspoken, and bold identity. Women generally accept injustice and discrimination as

the destiny of their lives. Durrani writes well about her personal experiences and draws similarities with all other women. She takes us on a journey that begins with her upbringing in an oppressive society and ends with Gulam Mustafa Khar's (her husband) terrible marriage. This autobiography depicts every single life of a woman, irrespective of rich and poor, adolescent and adult, knowledgeable as well as ignorant, psychosomatic difficulties and comparable circumstances that women in all social classes encounter. In this journey, she adopted existentialism and emphasized individual freedom and choice.

Tehmina Durrani was born into a wealthy household in Lahore and describes how her life took a terrible turn after becoming the sixth wife of a prominent politician in Pakistan. In the book, *My Feudal Lord*, Durrani is apprenticed by her mother, who has a governing personality. She wanted all her children to be dutiful, "My mother demanded total obedience and, although I always complied, she discerned early signs of rebellion in both my expression and my body language. I obeyed, but my crime was that I did not look obedient (24)". Her mother claims that she will never be able to be a great wife or mother if she is not a respectful descendant. At the same time, her mother's dominating persona keeps her dormant. The constant belittling leads to an existential crisis in her character. The male folk members must be obligated to be respected by women. Valerie Bryson in *Feminist Political Theory* opines that according to Millett:

Patriarchy's chief institution is the family, and many other radical feminists have agreed that, contrary to the assumptions of conventional political theory, the family is indeed a central part of society's power structure; as such it both sustains patriarchal power in the 'public' world and is itself a source of women's oppression (175-176).

The only purpose of a woman's existence is to get married; there are no matters of character and individualism. These are the things that are crushed and never fully developed. "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" (29-30).

Straightforwardly, Durrani admits that it was unrealistic for her to hope to marry a colourful, tall, dark, and handsome feudal lord. She let herself fall into Mustafa Khar's trap. "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 (Durrani 39)". After their marriage, Mustafa confines Durrani and separates her from the outside world. Throughout her life, she has been insulted and ridiculed for adhering to this social hierarchy. When she attempted to rebel against it, she was mistreated. Tehmina Durrani states, "Later, in our bedroom, my insolence was punished with yet another sharp slap. He called me an exhibitionist, a woman without shame" (216). He beat her up every single day without fail. She made it an effort never to irritate him. She was terrified that even the tiniest reaction from him would confirm his perception of her as an ordinary slut. It had become Mustafa's regular desire to attack her. Even he would never tolerate a small mistake or delay, which led to a severe

beating. He cannot tolerate her disobedience to any cost, “Never – ever – disobey me! You have to do what I tell you to do” (95).

Tehmina Durrani was emotionally and physically constrained by Mustafa's hypocrisy, which prevented her from expressing her annoyance and raising her voice against her oppression. He persuaded her not to say anything negative about him, even though doing so would damage the family's reputation and disgrace him. He manipulated her into believing that their Muslim community would not respect her for being an ideal wife:

Your position will be reduced to the lowly one that all my other wives had. I don't want you to be humiliated. Nobody should ever say that I dared or wished to lift my hand to you. I want people to respect you – if they thought that I didn't, why should they? . . . I was conditioned to believe in the concept that image is the paramount thing. This was a personal and private matter between my husband and me. (104)

Tehmina Durrani maintained her silence because she wanted to preserve her marriage and believed it to be a private matter between a husband and wife. The distorted version of the Qur'an convinced her. “According to feudal tradition, a wife was honoured and 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) In this way, males employ religion to legitimize their preconceived notions about women's roles in the home and society, as well as to impose their common stereotypes on them. Religion was misinterpreted, and women were given a distorted picture of it to make them obedient. She sensed complete absurdity in her life. “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). Women were raised with the belief that marriage is the sole path to social respect; divorced or separated women are not looked up to in society. Within Pakistani society, a divorced woman was measured disrespectfully, “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). Ignoring her husband's cruelty, horrible treatment, repugnant and oppressive actions, a Pakistani woman always took an audacious step to try to save her married life from being apart, “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). Women are so deeply ingrained in society that their abuse is concealed beneath the flimsy facade of fate. Durrani endured a lot, as Sartre believes according to Cudden:

man can emerge from his passive and intermediate condition and, by an act of will, become engaged; whereupon he is committed (through engagement) to some action and takes part in social and political life. Through commitment, man provides a reason and structure for his existence and thus helps to integrate society (316- 317).

she had numerous attempts to file a divorce but failed. She was carried, rather shrewdly, back to captivity (home). Once she confronts: “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)

Durrani was cleverly brought back home like a perfect wife, to support Mr. Khar during his period of suffering when he was put in jail. She was accustomed to being a decent wife in a social context, therefore she was accepted, “I fell suddenly in love with a noble idea – the return of the exiled leader” (252). Mustafa agreed her to be his part, “The words I had written on the Koran haunted me: ‘I will stand by Mustafa through his incarceration be it for life’” (292). She worked hard to recover Mustafa from the evil situation, but he did not even recognize her efforts. Rather, he started an illicit relationship with Durrani’s younger sister, Adila. When Durrani objected to this relation, he declared Tehmina was a psychologically ill person: (“‘Tehmina isn’t well at all,’ he said with feigned compassion. He referred to meningitis that had struck me down as a child . . . ‘She’s Imagining things,’ he contended” (166). She was unable to prove his illicit relationship and even failed in her attempt to rescue her sister from Mustafa's trap. Durrani suffered cruel treatment once more when Mustafa kidnapped his children. He locked her in the bathroom once more. Durrani grew weary of her cruel and harsh treatment of her husband. After enduring it for so long eventually, she succeeded in getting a divorce and came out from the cage of Mustafa Khar. She must, however, pay a very high price for her life of sovereignty. She was forced to separate from her husband's financial support as well as the supervision of her children.

### Conclusion:

Durrani's increasing intensity corresponds with her life of suffering, mental anguish, and mistreatment has inspired and energized countless people who resemble her. She has made an effort to destroy the way society has distorted the image of women and take the responsibility to live the life of her own choice. Within the framework of existentialism, freedom is not related to disorder or the destruction of society, but rather to the destruction of inherited values and the creation of new values by human beings themselves. The goal is to achieve the desired freedom.

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