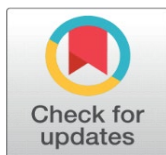
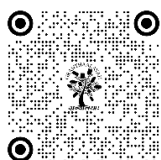


SOUTH-ASIAN CULTURAL SCENARIO IN SELECTED WORKS OF TEHMINA DURRANI, TASLIMA NASREEN AND SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

The novels of Tehmina Durrani, Taslima Nasreen and Shashi Deshpande have brilliantly and powerfully project women-centred issues in the South-Asian Cultural Scenario. As they have inherited a shared legacy of the Pre-Independent India, they weave a rainbow (to speak metaphorically) of issues, concerns and difficulties experienced by women in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh that obstruct their growth in developing as fuller human beings. They meticulously project and define traditions values, taboos and socio-cultural constraints that make their living precarious in society. These women novelists hold patriarchy and its different manifestations responsible for the marginalisation of women in South Asian societies. The psychological delineation of women characters in the novels is superb. Their place in society, their motivation-level, their resistance to suffocating patriarchal norms and their sacrifice and compromise find expression through their interaction with other characters in the texts.

Keywords: Repression, Marginalization, Subjugation, Indoctrination, Internalization

1. INTRODUCTION

The specific issues related to the South Asian Socio-cultural milieu get reflected in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and *The Binding Vine*, Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* and *Blasphemy* and *Lajja* by Taslima Nasrin. Motifs like women's repression, domestic violence, physical assaults on women and rape find expression in the said texts. All these heinous crimes happen as the societies create conditions where women are systematically marginalized and treated as second class citizens. They bear all sorts of atrocities because they remain economically dependent on their spouses resulting in their lower-self esteem. All the women represented in the novels like Jaya, Urmi, Kalpana, Tehmina, Heer, Maya and Shamima perfectly fit into Simone de Beauvoir's concept of a woman not being born but becoming one under the force of socio-cultural pressures. The patriarchal repression dwarfs the personalities of the above mentioned women. Both Jaya and Urmi find it hard to reconcile with the harsh realities of their lives. Both realize their optionlessness in their respective socio-cultural set-up. Their patriarchal indoctrination emerges as a key factor responsible for their misery. Urmi's passionate attachment with her dead daughter, Anu, turns out to be a source of suffering for her. She remains torn between memories of Anu and her commitment to Kartik. She emerges as a representative woman who withdraws into herself and cuts herself off from all socio contact. But ultimately her grief and sorrow get sublimated as she steps forward to help Shakuntala, the mother of a rape victim, Kalpana. Urmi emerges a social crusader for the cause

of a rape victim, takes the matter to the press, gets the case reopened and reinvestigated leading to the arrest of the rapist. She even snubs the police-officer who wanted to hush-up the case by merely recording it as an accident. Through Urmi, Deshpande has exposed the evil of forced sex in Indian marriages. Mira's diary exposes and reveals her repression and suffocation in an incompatible marriage. Mira's ideas of love within marriage get shattered as her husband forces her into sex every night much against her wishes. Urmi emerges as a true feminist in the novel by championing the cause of women like Kalpana and Mira. In society, there are hardly any sympathisers for women like Kalpana and Mira but Urmi proves to be an exception. She even rebukes Vanaa for playing second fiddle to her husband, Harish. She advises her to assert herself. Deshpande traces the development of Jaya, too. Torn between the demands of her creativity and domestic commitment, she sacrifices her creative urge to compose poems in an attempt to please her husband, Mohan. But the crisis in their life as a result of Mohan's alleged financial fraud opens up the window to a reality check. Like Mira, she too had confronted a rape-like situation in marriage. Again like Mira, she had not protested when her name had been changed to Suhasini, annihilating her identity. She represents all those women who like Gandhari blind fold themselves to escape from the harsh realities of life. Jaya experiences another patriarchal dimension when Mohan puts the blame for the alleged shady deal on her saying that he had done it all for the family. Jaya's hour of trial climaxes when Mohan leaves the house and Rahul disappears. She harbours premonition about Mohan's death, feeling guilty for not having accompanied Mohan into exile like Sita. She regains her balance after getting re-assured of the safety and well being of both Mohan and Rahul.

Deshpande presents both Jaya and Urmi trapped in their respective circumstances where there is hardly any appreciation for their roles, feelings, emotions, expectations and even requirements. But while Urmi emerges as a champion for safeguarding the rights of women like Shakuntala, Kalpana and Vanaa, Jaya remains trapped in her narrow spectrum swinging between hope and despair.

Tehmina Durrani in *My Feudal Lord and Blasphemy* has very daringly represented the plight of women dehumanized physically, psychologically and even spiritually in a repressive Islamic set-up in the name of Allah and Islam. Tehmina in her autobiography *My Feudal Lord* has exposed the details of her own private life in an attempt to stir the conscience of a nation where women are treated as mere commodities exploited by men for satisfying their lust. Tehmina represents all those women in Pakistan society who bear all sorts of atrocities at the hands of their husbands but still put up a façade of happiness. Tehmina has spoken on behalf of millions of Pakistani hapless women who bear dehumanization of their minds and bodies as part of their destiny. But Tehmina stood by her resolve to regain her self-respect in a society where she was disinherited by her own father for disobeying her husband. She confronted none other than Mustafa Khar, a powerful Pakistani politician and a feudal lord. When she defied him, when she decided to reconstruct herself, she put aside all other considerations like losing her children and precious possessions to Mustafa as she had invoked 'Khulla' to divorce her husband. She even outwitted her wily politician husband who tried every Machiavellian trick to bring her back into his fold. The publication of *My Feudal Lord* evoked negative publicity in the Pakistani society not used to getting exposed at the hands of a social rebel like Tehmina. Her name became a household word in Pakistan. Reprimanding husbands forbade their rebellious wives to behave like Tehmina. She launched 'Jehad', "a movement to represent the silent majority to raise controversial issues that most people feel afraid to speak about" (*My Feudal Lord* 381).

In *Blasphemy*, too, she continued her aggressive stance against the custodians of religious shrines, the Pirs who exploited gullible and ignorant people especially women like Heer in the name of Allah and Islam. She presented graphic details of dastardly crimes like rape, incest and sodomy being practiced with impunity at such places. Heer, the protagonist of the novel, represents all such unfortunate women thrust into the Inferno called marriage by parents who consider their daughters a burden and are in a tearing hurry to marry them off. Tehmina has exposed the murky affairs of such shrines by highlighting various crimes of Pir Sain who subjugates and exploits helpless women like Heer. Impostors like Pir Sain thrive on the ignorance, gullibility and superstitious attitudes of the people dwelling in the shrine. Reading of the translated versions of the Quran is forbidden to keep the inmates in the dark regarding the true meaning of Islam. Toti, the supernatural woman who appears before Heer, rightly calls them impostors and the bitterest enemies of the Prophet. Far from being holy, such shrines are mercenary and political where women like Heer, Chel and Yathimri are physically exploited, thrashed at the slightest pretext and subjected to bestial cruelties by Pir on a routine basis. Pir even casts an evil eye on his own daughter Guppy and Heer gets sucked into his crimes as an accomplice providing him girls on a daily basis to save Guppy from her father's lust. Overwhelmed with grief, shame and guilt, she even doubts the Almighty's justice. She wonders whether hypocrites like Pir Sain stands exonerated of all their sins simply because of the holiness of their ancestors.

Tehmina Durrani has emerged as a daring woman who has espoused the cause of women in both the novels by periling her own life and reputation by speaking for countless Pakistani women forced into silence on one pretext or the other. Both her novels project some of the pressing problems of women in the contemporary realities of women in South Asia. She gives a clarion call to women to rise against injustices perpetrated against them and come out of their shells into which they have been confined for centuries. Tehmina has succeeded in arousing the conscience of a nation against the evil designs of feudal lords like Mustafa and impostors like Pir Sain. The novelist by her superb presentation of Heer's character has hit very hard at the shrines in an attempt to enlighten women regarding the real motives of these shrines. Heer finally exposes the evils like polygamy, marriages between siblings and incest going on in the shrine. Both Tehmina and Heer throw their privacy to the winds for the greater cause of serving humanity. The novelist makes Heer reveal the dark secrets of the Shrine in a subtle way even at the risk of staking her own reputation. When Sakhi Bibi after Pir Sain's death, approaches Heer for stopping the marriage between two siblings, Heer confronts her with the following words, "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 it the worst. Let the myth shatter and the filth spill over" (Blasphemy 208).

Sakhi Bibi's warning to Heer that Allah's curse would befall on her for allowing wedlock between two siblings, Rajaji and Maharani elicits the following response from Heer, "No, it will not. His curse will fall upon me if I prevent the evil from showing itself only if it is visible can't the people see that this twisted system is opposed to Islamic teachings. When the people see it, they will uproot it" (208). Together with Tehmina Durrani and Shashi Deshpande, Taslima Nasrin too, has contributed a lot to women's cause by highlighting the marginalization and dehumanization of women in a repressive patriarchal regime. She is the one who shocked the Mullahs by expressing herself freely on subjects like religion and sex. Her rebellious and revolutionary stance has earned her the wrath of the Maulvis who are thirsty for her blood. She holds religious fundamentalism to be solely responsible for crimes against humanity especially against women. Like Tehmina, she has laid bare the details of her personal life with the aim of focusing on the plight and misery of women in a repressive patriarchal regime. In her non-fiction work *No Country for Women*, she airs her opinion about topics as diverse as tyranny of husbands, female foeticide, sexual harassment of women, religion and women's rights and the right of a woman to live alone. The above mentioned book has outlined a theoretical frame work for her works including *Lajja*, her controversial novel.

Nasrin has succeeded in highlighting the atrocities perpetrated against women in Bangladesh in the aftermath of demolition of Babri Masjid at Ayodhya. The novelist has driven home the point that in a social upheaval like the one witnessed in Bangladesh in 1994, the worst-hit are the women who become a soft-target for rioters hell-bent on avenging a particular event. *Lajja* demonstrates many of Taslima's feminist concerns and women centered issues. The patriarchal set-up erases a woman's individuality and self respect. Women like Kironmoyee make all sorts of sacrifices to keep the family intact. The novelist has de-constructed the myth of spirituality which associates with women virtues like simplicity, sincerity and sacrifice. Nasrin shows that all these virtues are potent weapons of patriarchy employed for the subjugation and subordination of women. Perhaps, that is why, Kironmoyee accepts with calm resignation the infertility of her husband, Sudhamoyee. Nasrin has hit very hard Muslim fundamentalism which becomes instrumental in thrusting upon women untold atrocities in the name of Allah and Islam. Maya and Shamima Begum emerge as Nasrin's voice in the novel. In the wake of riots in Bangladesh, after the demolition of Babri Masjid, numberless girls like Maya were abducted, raped and killed at the hands of the fundamentalists. Critics have labeled the novel as pornographic but the details related to rape of women and other forms of dehumanizing of women's bodies are meant to shock a sleeping nation out of its listlessness. The hue and cry raised by Maulvis and Mullahs simply shows that Nasrin's shock treatment is effective. One is reminded of the public outcry after the publication of D.H. Lawrence's controversial novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. D.H. Lawrence, referring to the puritan out-burst against him, had remarked that his treatment is working. The same is true of Nasrin's *Lajja*.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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None

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