

# Family, Honor (Ghairat) and the Female Experience

Jowairia Umeruddeen

Research Scholar, Department of English, Bangalore University, Bangalore- 560 056.

Email ID: jowairia@gmail.com

In this paper, "Family, Honor (Ghairat) and the Female Experience", I will be examining how the concept of family and honor have been socio-politically constructed in the deeply patriarchal society of Pakistan and how these impact upon the female experience. I have analyzed *Blasphemy*, a novel by Tehmina Durrani as a source to support some of the statements I have made in this paper. In patriarchal Pakistani society, though women consist of half of the population, they are not given equal opportunities to take part in national development. Women live in an atmosphere of fear and face the most abusive forms of violence which take place in their homes. Living in a male-dominated society and a culture that recognizes them as inferior in relation to men, makes them vulnerable to poverty and different types of violence. Urban women have by and large better access to education and employment opportunities, and they are not as bound by many of the constraints faced by rural women. Patriarchy operates in both the public and the private spheres to control women. Like many other patriarchal societies, Pakistan has different standards and notions of 'honour' for males and females and women are expected to comply with socio-cultural norms to ensure family's 'honour'. Violence against women unfortunately is a tacitly recognized tool to control women's sexuality and to maintain the hierarchy of gender-power relation in patriarchal societies.

In 1991, Tehmina Durrani made her literary debut with her controversial autobiography *My Feudal Lord*. Her next major work is *Blasphemy*. The novel is set in south Pakistan, and is inspired by a true story. It is a tragic and an utterly shocking story which exposes the ugly faces of people in power.

Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* tells the catastrophic story of the beautiful protagonist Heer. Heer, is a simple girl and like any other teenager has her own dreams and aspirations. Just like she has read in books and seen in movies, she is awaiting for true love to arrive and sweep her off her feet. Much to her dismay, Heer's widow mother gets her married at the age of fifteen to Peer Sain. He is a man of great honor and prestige and is considered to be divine by his followers. he is seen as the link between God and ignorant people. Irrespective of the fact that Peer Sain is several years older than Heer, the marriage is fixed. For Heer's Mother, this alliance is a way to redeem her own status in the society and Heer's marriage to Peer Sain helps her in doing so in every possible way.

Heer enters her new house with a whole lot of dreams and expectations, but what follows in this marriage is a

continuous cycle of torture, both physical and emotional. She is beaten, humiliated, abused and raped. She finds herself trapped and is thus forced to live in the world her husband made for her. But she soon realizes that the nightmare she is locked into is not hers alone; it affects the entire clan that owes allegiance to the Pir. In the Pir's *haveli*, unspeakable horrors are committed day in and out, all in the name of Allah. Absorbed into the fetid hell of her husband's making, Heer loses her dignity, her freedom, even her humanity, till a terrible resolution gives her back to herself.

The gender roles, identities and relations that make up the conventional family as a social unit came under criticism and scrutiny in western feminism of the 1970s and onwards. Most feminists felt that it was within this space, unheeded by the world outside, where patriarchal laws were upheld in the most primitive form. Feminist scholarship has shown this social arrangement to be a part of patriarchy's oppressive regime. Feminist analyzed the family in two ways: first as a social arrangement and second as an ideology that communicates a preferred form of organization which is internalized by all, including those most victimized by it. Family operates in such a way that gender stereotypical roles are reinforced. Pir Sain being the leader of a Shrine exercises his power by using violence in order to maintain his authority and assures the subjugation of the women in the *haveli*. Rajaji, the son of Heer, internalizes the same ideas of violence and learns early on how to use the same in order to reinforce patriarchal constructed gender identities.

*Blasphemy* could be read as viewing the concept of family from a woman's perspective. Heer's problem of being a woman starts at the level of family. Her family thinks nothing of marrying her off to an elderly Pir Sain all for the sake of regaining their lost social status. As a member of Pir Sain's family she's relegated to the status of a sexual slave in her role as a wife. As a mother she is allowed to have very little say in the upbringing of her own children. As a social being, she's ironically seen as the upholder of the honor of this very same family. By narrating her life's details, Heer gives the reader a woman's view on the ideology of family.

Another ideology which the novel deals with is family honor or *Ghairat*. *Ghairat* is an Urdu word that usually means honor or pride. There is no ubiquitous definition of *ghairat*. It broadly means the sense of

belonging or entitlement to certain customs and if a person goes against or confronts those customs, he/she is considered to have defiled *ghairat*. This concept of *ghairat* is a key element of the Pakistani tribal society as depicted in this novel. In Pakistani society, people generally are quite possessive about their *ghairat* to the extent that they can even kill someone who defiles it. This is what is known as “honor-killings” and most of the time the victims in all cases are women. Honor-killings involve the killing of a relative, most commonly women, who are perceived to have brought dishonor upon the family. Dishonorable behavior as perceived by society can take many forms as the term “dishonor” can be interpreted in many ways. These dishonorable acts include infidelity, refusal to submit to an arranged marriage, marrying someone the family disapproves of, seeking divorce, being raped, or even a simple act such as going out alone at night. The phenomenon of female servitude contributing to and enhancing male honour (*ghairat*) is not a new concept in the Pakistan and Afghanistan at large. Male honour is both specific to the individual as well as extending to his whole family. Therefore, any act committed by the female members of a given family that goes against male supremacy directly, or damages it indirectly is unforgivable in Pakistan’s patriarchal society. “Gender relations in Pakistan rest on two basic perceptions; that women are subordinate to men, and that a man’s honour resides in the actions of the women of his family” — (Lewis 1994). Not only are the restrictions of women’s liberty maintained in the name of this honour, but they can also be put to death if they ‘lose’ this honour.

Following the code of the *ghairat* honor killings, in 1990 the government of Pakistan passed a law that gave a man the right to, at any time, kill his wife, daughter, sister if he considered them to have defiled his honor. After coming under much international and national pressure, the government of Pakistan in 2001, then formulated and passed a counter law that made *ghairat* honor killings punishable by law. Any person found guilty could be sentenced to a prison term, or punished by the death penalty. However, the effectiveness of this second law is not certain, since person found guilty may still go unpunished by simply providing monetary compensation to the victim’s family. The effectiveness of the Law is further weakened by the fact that in many cases the victim and the accused belong to the same family. In Patriarchal Pakistani society, the civil code cannot and is not, allowed to encroach on the inner space of the family. Honor killings can be understood through the deeply entrenched concept of women being viewed as property within the social, political, economical spaces of Pakistani society. In addition, majority of Pakistan’s tribal regions are semi-autonomous and are often governed by religious fundamentalists makes it difficult to enforce the 2004 laws. Women in Pakistan are the victims of systematic violations as a result of their gender which is evident as seen specifically through such discriminatory laws. Even after the move towards urbanization in the last 30 years, Pakistani society dominantly remains a tribal and

patriarchal society. In Pakistan, the honor of a man as said in an Arabic expression lies between the legs of the women in his family. Any attempt to break or resist the restraints of this system can lead to death. Thus, it is not surprising that the Human Rights Commission reported 675 women to have been killed in the name of honor in the first nine months of 2011 while in 2010, the figure was 791.

This concept of honor is time and again used to subordinate and silence women and to justify violence against them. The ideology that a daughter is the torchbearer of her father’s (and brothers’) honor is what forces Heer, the protagonist of *Blasphemy* to silently suffer. Openly talking about their marital problems would only bring disrepute to their families. Pir Sain seems to practice two different faces of patriarchy, the public and the private, in order to control women. Setting different standards and concepts of honor for males and females, he expects the women of the *haveli* to comply with these socio-cultural norms to ensure the family’s and the shrine’s honor. He uses violence as a recognized tool to control the women’s sexuality and to maintain an upper hand in gender-power relations. Blasphemy exhibits how female servitude contributes to and enhances male honor to the point where male honor is viewed as the honor of the whole family unit. Therefore, any act committed by the female that goes against or challenges male supremacy directly, or damages it indirectly is unforgivable in patriarchal society. The concept of honor is time and again used to subordinate Heer and silence her and other women and to justify violence against them. The ideology that a daughter is the torchbearer of her father’s (and brother’s) honor is what forces Heer to suffer silently. Openly talking about marital problems would only bring disrepute to the husband and his family in a strictly conservative Pakistani society. The female identity is constructed through the ideology of family. By linking the concept of family honor with female subjugation, family emerges as a patriarchal tool of oppression in the female experience. Heer’s experience of her family life is as that of a torch-bearer of honor. She marries for the sake of her family’s honor. She silently suffers for the sake of her husband’s honor. Her entire life revolves around her silent subjugation in order to uphold this honor. Heer loses her dignity, her freedom, even her humanity, in order to survive. It is only when she decides that she wants to break free from this fetid hell of her husband’s making, she fights to give her back to herself. But her revolt is met with disdain and disbelief from her family. Her son having internalized the same patriarchal values sees her as a disgrace to the honor of the family. Her daughters too do not offer much support and instead try to coax her back into her old shell of silence and subjugation. They are yet another example of how the victims of patriarchal power-structures often perpetuate the tool of their own oppression.

*Blasphemy* raises questions about the family being a ‘private sphere’, which remains more or less a taboo topic

to be discussed in public in Islamic patriarchy. Family as a concept is still appealed to in all debates about the erosion of social values. The ideology of 'the family' is utilized to effect by Pir Sain in order maintain his power. Despite carrying out innumerable violent crimes on women and children of his own family, he does not fail to use the same concept of family when he wants to be seen as the protector of conventional family structures from the forces of change. The bonds of kinship make family life potentially more repressive for women like Heer. The female experience becomes more sordid and complex when their immediate kith and kin view them as objects rather than as individuals. So called family and the spaces within family become problematic in the female experience, with no external interference, any law or otherwise which challenges can be of help to a woman.

It has been several years since the government of Pakistan passed its first law allowing *ghairat* honor killings. This thus directly reflects the responsibility of international and national law to protect women from physical and corporal harm, and in turn to uphold and protect women's rights as human rights.

Tehmina Durrani, through her act of writing, narrating Heer's ordeal, is thus articulating the female experience. This is a way of resistance against the patriarchal power structures. Through Heer and her story, Tehmina Durrani draws attention to the real issues of subordination and oppression of women in Pakistan. Openly writing about a topic whose public debate is considered taboo in a strictly Islamic patriarchal society she tries to expose the Pakistani ideologues and its perceived notions of family and honor.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Durrani, Tehmina. *Blasphemy: A Novel*. India: Penguin Groups, 1998, Print.
- [2] Lari, Maliha Zia. *A Pilot Study On: 'Honour Killings' in Pakistan and Compliance of Law*. Pakistan. Aurat Publication and Information Service Foundation. (2011). Print.
- [3] Khan, Hafiza Nilofar. "South Asian Fiction and Marital Agency of Muslim Wives". *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*.
- [4] Mubarik, Asma. "Loss of Essential Humanity and Empathy as a Result of Exploitations in Blasphemy by Tehmina Durrani".
- [5] Kesarewani, Ramnath. "Patriarchy, Religion and Women: An Analysis of Tehmina Durrani's Blasphemy".
- [6] Iftikhar, Arsalan. "Honor Killings Are A Global Problem", *TIME*, (2016). n.pag. Web.