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The Status of Women in Islam: A Study of Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*

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Abstract: World over the status of women has multiple dimensions. In this regard, Islam accords a high place to women. Fatema Mernissi holds that Islam teaches egalitarianism by bringing parity between men and women (*A Muslim Feminist Interpretation of Women's Empowerment and Gender Parity* 5). Muslim societies on a large scale, however, are far away from the parity Islam endorses and promotes. Their valorisation of gender denied women the opportunity of education and cross social dialogue which in turn left a wide gap between men and women. This paper attempts to decipher underlying dichotomy existing within these binaries. In this process, the paper seeks to focus on gendered categorisations and biological sex to show that Islam does speak about biological difference, but it is incompatible with gender inequality and discrimination. This is so because gender is social elaboration of biological sex; it exaggerates biological differences; and it carries biological difference into domains in which it is completely irrelevant.

The paper seeks to highlight Tehmina Durrani's description of the backward status of women and the perpetuation of gender inequality in Muslim society. Side by side, it also endeavours to point out that women in Muslim societies are no doubt lacking behind their male counterpart but their backwardness (this) is not because of Islamic teachings, instead it is due to the unfair imposition of socially oriented gender role. Using this as yardstick, the attempt is also made to explain that the Islamic scriptures have been hijacked by male in Muslims societies, and they interpret it to have control over women.

Simon de Beauvoir's understanding of gender will be used as theoretical basis of the paper. Apart from Simon de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault's theory of power will also be used to underline how power helps exploiting knowledge and how knowledge in turn perpetuates inequality and discrimination.

Keywords: Gender, Biology, Inequality, Society

Introduction



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Tehmina Durrani, a fiery feminist and social activist of Pakistan dazzled the literary field with her exceptional works namely, *My Feudal Lord* (1991) and *Blasphemy* (1998). She minutely observes the perilous conditions of women in Muslim society of Pakistan in particular and the world in general. Her observation leads her to the conclusion that male oriented norms and traditions camouflaged in “Islamic teachings” are hostile and regressive to women. In her biographical novel entitled *Blasphemy* (1998), Durrani takes strong exception to torture, discrimination, sexual abuse, violence, and murder perpetrated pretenders of faith (Islam) in the name of Islam. She is shocked to see the gender inequality prevailing in the society under the umbrella of pseudo-Islamic teachings and for the time being it seems to her that this inequality and the immense gap between male and female is unbridgeable. Although, she did feel thwarted initially by the inhuman practices unleashed upon women by patriarchal goons, but she did succeed professing the equality of men and women through her novel- *Blasphemy*

Status of women: A glimpse of History

Dream of an egalitarian society remains a distant dream in the absence of parity between male and female. The basic parameter of a good and just society lies in the fair treatment of its male and female without any biasness and preconceived notions. It is, however, known to all that women have been subjected to discrimination, torture and abuse time and again. History bears witness to the fact that women have always occupied a secondary (as “other”) role as compared to men. Masculinity has always been considered to be “absolute human type,” the yardstick for humanity. The history of women’s past in almost all civilizations had been very much bleak. Aristotle, a great philosopher, once said “the female is a female by virtue of certain lack of qualities” (*Gender and History* 13). Niccolo Machiavelli too disregards women: “. . . fortune is female and if you want to stay on top of her you have to slap and thrust” (101). History talks highly about *Greek* civilization and claims that it had been the golden civilization among all ancient civilizations. In *Greek* civilization women were looked down upon morally and socially. An imaginary woman called Pandora is thought to be the source of all evil in *Greek* mythology (*Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam*. Ch. 2. p.4). It is supposed in Judeo-Christian societies that human being gets birth in sin. The responsibility of this alleged sin is placed solely on Eve, because Eve is believed to



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have caused Adam to commit the sin. Hence, she is guilty of that sin and was punished not forgiven (Holy Bible Genesis: 03:16). Falling in line with *Greek* and Judeo-Christian civilization, the pre-Islamic or *Jahiliyyah* (Milestone 19) civilization used to bury their girl child alive, for they thought they (Girls) would bring shame to them (*From Jahiliyyah To Islamic Worldview* 216).

With the advent of Islam, the long history of women oppression and exploitation got a death blow. Turning the age old anti-women tradition upside down, Islam held women in high esteem: “Heaven lies beneath the feet of mothers” (*Status of Women in Islam* 22). It means one deserves paradise if one serves one’s mother well. Apart from this, Islamic scriptures (Qur’an and Hadith) possess plenty of verses which speak explicitly about the well being of women. Islam brought radical changes in the society of Arabia in all aspects and particularly with respect to women. Keeping aside the patriarchal norms of the Seventh century, it bestowed property, divorce, and inheritance rights to women and asserted in Qur’an: “And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them (‘the rights against them’ stands for marriage and divorce rights)” (02:228). Bolstering this practice of Islam Sir Charles Edward Archibald Hamilton says: “Islam teaches that man and woman have come from the same essence, possess the same soul and have been equipped with equal capabilities for intellectual, spiritual and moral attainments (qtd. in *Prophet Muhammad in the Bible* 320). It is Islam which liberated women refuting the concept of Original Sin of Judeo-Christian civilization saying: “both suffered the consequence and both apologized profusely” (Qur’an 07:23). Therefore, Islam gave utmost emphasis upon the welfare of women to bring parity between both the sexes right from the beginning of its existence.

Sex and Gender

Generally people hardly make any distinction between these two terms and use them interchangeably instead. It sounds strange to many ears that sex and gender are poles apart. Narrative of gender in the present context of the world is commonplace and everyone is surrounded by gender lore. Gender is so much entrenched in institution, debate, action, and beliefs of people that it appears to be natural. One fails to understand that “Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do- something



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we perform” (qtd. in *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Translation and Gender Studies* 129). This dispels the dilemma of gender being natural and asserts that gender is socially and traditionally constructed.

Sex is natural and biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential on the one hand; gender is social and traditional exposition and elaboration of sex on the other. Simon de Beauvoir worked out this dichotomy between sex and gender dexterously and comes out to a conclusion that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (*The Second Sex* 14). She tries to underline that it is not her physical state which legitimizes her destiny as a woman; it is the society instead which constructs her image as a woman. Being a woman here implies weak therefore dependent on men, emotional not rational, passive not active, an object of sex.

Tehmina Durrani unfolds plethora of instances of injustices, discriminations, sexual abuse, and tortures unleashed upon women due to the proliferation of gender lores steeped in pseudo-Islamic teachings in her novel *Blasphemy*:

Woman: An Object of Sex

Although, Islam makes it compulsory to treat women with love, but it is really shocking to the world and Islam that women instead of being treated as a human being are being treated as sexual slaves: “...live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If ye take a dislike to them it may be that ye dislike a thing, and Allah brings about through it a great deal of good” (Qur’an 04:19). Tehmina Durrani takes exceptional stance against the treatment of women solely as an object of sex which she considers to be the attribute of *Jahalia* (*Blasphemy* 103). Pir Sain, the antagonist of the novel *Blasphemy*, is the devil in human form who projected himself to be “pious” and “Islamic scholar” among the masses. As the author says: “A parasite (referring to Pir Sain) nibbling on the Holy Book, he was a Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night” (*Blasphemy* 143). The Masses entrapped themselves believing in this mythical self-projection of Pir and consider him to be infallible. This mythical and unfounded belief of the masses facilitated Pir immense opportunity and power to “colonize” (*Power and Knowledge* 99) the minds of the people as well as to “conceal” (qtd. in *Transitions in Continental Philosophy* 40) his misdeeds. Being colonized



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by Pir, people around him never questioned his so called position as a pious person. It is the protagonist (Heer) who brings out misdeeds of Pir into public domain. The protagonist (Heer) exposes the hypocrisies of her husband Pir who reduced women to an object of sex. She (Heer) says, “Pir Sain spoke, but only of sex. Planning the next act, discussing the last one, seeking opinions on new one, comparing it to another one, until the matter took up my entire life” (*Blasphemy* 138). She seeks to highlight that her position to her husband called Pir Sain is not like a human being, a wife and a woman, but only as an object of sex to satisfy his animal desire. As soon as he gets his carnal desire satisfied, he casts her aside and does not give her even a second look. In fact, Islam looks at both men and women in equal terms and proclaims the ‘mantra’ of equality at several places. Contrary to what Pir practices, Islam says: “Only a man of noble character will honour women and only a man of base intentions will dishonour them” (qtd. in *Women in Islamic Shari’ah* 17). Pir not only treated his wife as a sex slave but also others likewise. He kept on making sexual slaves whoever came in contact with him. To Heer’s utter shock, Pir even tried his monkey trick upon his own daughter called Guppi. Furthermore, Pir committed the most heinous crime against an orphan girl called Yathimry. The author puts the whole scenario of a child rape quite vividly: “A wounded baby deer with frightened eyes lay on the floor. Her mouth was stuffed with his handkerchief, her torso was naked, and her child-like breasts bore teeth marks” (*Blasphemy* 112). Now it becomes starkly clear that he made sex slaves everyone his eyes rest upon. Pir did claim himself to be defender of faith but his misdeeds are not in consonance with Islamic teachings. He only pays lip services to Islam and distorts Islamic teachings to fulfill his ulterior motives instead. Besides emphasizing on the equal rights of women, Islam speaks about the security and safety of orphan as well, as it says in Qur’an: “Therefore, treat not the orphan with harshness” (93:09), Therefore, women have been accorded a high place in Islam but persons like Pir turns a deaf ear to the call of Islam and dishonour women.

Masculine approach to Scripture

It goes without saying that Islamic principles don’t intend to look down upon women nor does it suppress their individual freedom in any regards; instead it encourages women to play important roles in the affairs of the society irrespective of biological differences. Upholding the free will of women Islam says: “O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to take women



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against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness (Qur'an 04:19), Here Islam underlines the fact that women are free to take their decision on their own. They are as free to act on their will as their male counterparts. Far away from the truth of Islam, certain male members of the society do take verses of the scripture out of context and interpret them with masculine hue and colour. Tehmina Durrani looks into the patriarchal setup steeped in distorted version of Islam on the one hand, and the true Islamic Principal on the other and finds a big gap. Keeping this in mind, she seeks to expose the masculine approach to Islam.

The entire novel revolves around the shrine of which Pir Sain is the chief. The erection and worship of shrine is not in consonance with the teachings of Islam; even though, this sort of anti-Islamic tradition (knowledge) is invented and imposed upon the people. Being ignorant to the malicious design of Pir, people accepted it as though it is one of the integral parts of Islam. The invention and legitimization of anti-Islamic tradition to many seems to be a distant dream but it did happen and Michel Foucault too vouches for it thus: "Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true'" (Foucault 27). Although, the invented tradition is not in agreement with Islamic teaching yet it prospered because Pir has the power and he legitimized this anti-Islamic tradition through force. Hence, shrine is not a place of worship rather it is synonymous with male dominance and is supposed to be a so called link between the Almighty and the masses. Symbolically shrine stands for power and masculinity. Empowered by the 'divine image of the shrine', Pir keeps on exploiting women in every way. Durrani provides several instances to prove that the shrine is not really divine instead it is a centre for exploitation of women in particular and the masses in general: "The Shrine is a symbol of all exploitation" (*Blasphemy* 196). Therefore, she sets out to expose the patriarchal version of Islam by certain individuals of the society. The author underscores that goons of patriarchy like Pir Sain hijacked Islam and played fast and loose with its scripture. Having distorted the ideals of Islam, he projects it to the masses as true ideals. In fact, he used Islam as a ploy to perpetuate violence and gender biasness against women. The author makes it crystal clear in her novel *Blasphemy* where the protagonist Heer (a woman) speaks thus: "we are captives of a false and evil system. A poisonous octopus grips us. Its tentacles usurped the strength of



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Islam to exploit us in every possible way” (*Blasphemy* 195). The author here refers to the un-Islamic trend of Shrine worship inculcated by Pir in the mind of the masses to exploit women sexually.

Islam encourages both men and women to acquire knowledge so that an egalitarian society could be brought into existence. Islam asks people to apply logic and reason before making any teaching and suggestion their way of life so that they can't be misled and exploited: “O you believe! If a wicked person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest you harm people unwittingly and afterwards become full of repentance for what you have done” (49:6). Islam even goes on to refute the concept of link between human being and almighty and says: “And we have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein” (Qur'an 50:16). Therefore, one could conclude that Islamic scripture is accessible to all human being. PirSain, in the light of Islam is not upholding the Islamic principles rather he is dividing the society between men and women only to degrade and exploit women.

***Jahiliyyah* (Ignorance)**

Jahiliyyah or ignorance is yet another disease of the society fuelling the narrative of gender biasness and discrimination. Although, Islam gave a death blow to age old *Jahiliyyah* but one can't deny the fact that it still exists in the society of Muslims. Gripped in the hands of *Jahiliyyah*, Muslim societies unleash all sorts of inhuman activities upon women. The author made it clear that women are considered to be impure and second class human being in Muslim societies. *Blasphemy* professes this anti-social and gender biased practice thus: “‘Don't touch the chair, your hands will stain it’ (23). The author goes even further in exposing yet another discrimination based on gender. She argues that the pre-Islamic *Jahiliyyah* is re-enacted in the societies of Muslim today. She alludes to the pre-Islamic *Jahiliyyah* in her novel *Blasphemy* at several places which considered girl child to be a risk to their reputation and, therefore, girls used to be buried alive. Falling in line with pre-Islamic *Jahiliyyah*, the present societies of Muslims consider women to be a curse: “we women are known to be a curse,’ she would say in one breath” (*Blasphemy* 23). Having turned a deaf ear to the Islamic ideal of equality between the sexes, Muslim societies get disappointed at the



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birth of female child: “‘When a girl is born we mourn her as a risk to our honour,’ she would lament. ‘When a son is born, we celebrate, because a protector has arrived’ (*Blasphemy* 132). Contrary to what is being practised in Muslim societies today, Islam proclaims: *O Mankind! We have created you from a male and female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another* (Qur’an 49:13). Islam addresses the whole of humankind instead of making any differences on the basis of sexual difference, and this attitude asserts Islamic belief in equality of men and women.

Conclusion

The entire discussion concludes that there must not be any discrimination on the basis of biological differences and the Islamic scripture endorses the equality of men and women and encourages them to play constructive role in the society. On the other hand, it is also implied that any discrimination on the basis of biological differences will have serious repercussion and will consequently hamper the growth of the society. The rhetoric of gender is biased and has no logical basis in its genesis and existence. In fact, it treats women like slaves and males like masters. It believes in dehumanizing females, therefore it needs to be checked as soon as possible. For this scientific education is essential to the coming generation so that they could fathom the hollowness of gender rhetoric. This will help bringing women equal to men, since equality for both the sexes is the only way which can bring honour to women and peace to the society. Further, critical thinking needs to be appreciated so that the false system of patriarchy based on the pseudo-Islamic teachings could be challenged. Women need to be educated not to believe the middleman; instead they should rely on the authentic sources of Islam. This will further make women self-dependent and consequently liberate women from the clutches of men and false rhetoric of gender. Right from the advent of Islam, the scripture of Islam has been dominated by the males of the society and its adverse results are apparent in the shape of gender biasness, exploitation and illiteracy of women. Hence, it is prime time for women to take part in the affairs of Islam and visit the scripture of Islam so that they could expose the nefarious design of males pitted against women in numerous forms to enslave women. Exploitation of women is also the result of women’s dependency on men for financial support. Hence, in order to liberate themselves women have to earn so that they could become financially independent.



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