



Unveiling the Onslaught of *Jahiliyyah upon Muslims: Exploring Tehmina Durrani's
*Blasphemy***

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Abstract:

The present paper seeks to highlight the concept of *Jahiliyyah* – its rise, fall and resurgence, and the ways it upsets the societies of Muslims. The study seeks to address the problem of deviationism amongst Muslims which go by the name of ‘the basic tenets of Islam’ and how they have adopted *Jahiliyyah*'s way of life. It aims, therefore, to underline the irony looming large upon Muslims' existence due to the presence of *Jahiliyyah* and how it poses existential crisis among Muslims. This paper uses Islamic scriptures i.e. the Qur'an and Hadith as the theoretical basis and Sayyid Qutb' understanding of *Jahiliyyah* as an interpretive canon to understand the complexities involved in the entire debate. Consequently, the study also provides some suggestions as to how *Jahiliyyah* ways could be done away with.

Key Words: *Jahiliyyah*, Islam, Muslims, Sayyid Qutb.

*"The term *Jahiliyyah* is a purely Islamic coinage, a term implying 'Ignorance' – either of the true faith or of the way of civilization or of both combined" (The Changing Position of Women in Arabia Under Islam During the Early Seventh Century. P.6. (1986) by Faryal Abbas Abdullah Sulaimani) that it could act as conduit between the pristine practices of Islam and the pseudo-Islamic practices of Muslims. Although, the novel is narrated through fictional characters but is based on the real incident so that the true identity of the real characters remain undisclosed. Though, she discusses *Jahalia* (*Blasphemy* 103) at length in her novel, she sequesters it from its philosophical and stereological connotation and uses it in common parlance.



Introduction

Tehmina Durrani, one of the best literary doyens of Pakistan, illuminated the literary horizon of South Asia with her monumental novels such as *My Feudal Lord* (1991) and *Blasphemy* (1998). She wrote *Blasphemy* foregrounding the social milieu of the Muslim society of Pakistan in particular and the world in general. The novel received unimaginable fame across the world and shook the roots of deception of Muslim societies. Writing about society – its veracities and deception, is no doubt a tough task but to write against Muslim societies' deception and frailties is really a tough and risky task altogether. With utmost determination, she embarked on this task and exposed namesake Muslims and their un-Islamic deeds that twist and bend Islamic teachings to fulfil their ulterior motives. The author not only successfully exposed the hypocrisies of Muslim societies, but also set a platform for others as well.

Defining *Jahiliyyah*

Jahiliyyah is essentially an Islamic concept which refers to the days of ignorance in pre-Islamic period. The term *Jahiliyyah* occurs several times in Qur'an such as "And stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display, like that of the former Times of ignorance;" (Qur'an 33:33). Many authors have dealt with the concept of *Jahiliyyah* variously. It was first used by Ibn Taymiyyah, a medieval Islamic scholar, to refer to the backsliders of Muslim community (Sivan 65). Later, it was picked up by an Indian Islamic scholar Abu Ala Maududi in the twentieth century. The term was further chiselled by Sayyid Qutb, another Islamic scholar of twentieth century from Egypt. He defines *Jahiliyyah* in *Milestone* - his monumental work, thus:

When a person embraced Islam during the time of prophet, he would immediately cut off from *Jahiliyyah*. When he stepped into the circle of Islam, he would start a new life, separating himself completely from his past life under ignorance of the divine law.... and if at any time temptations overpowered him, or the old habits



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attracted him, or if he became lax in carrying out the injunctions of Islam, he would become restless with a sense of guilt and would feel the need to purify himself of what had happened. (Qutb, 19)

Sayyid Qutb tries to emphasize at the complete transformation of Muslims from *Jahiliyyah* to Islamic ways of life. He opines that there must not be an iota of *Jahiliyyah* feature in Muslim's ways of life and if it occurs in one's life one must turn towards Islam and ask forgiveness from the Almighty.

Historians opine that *Jahiliyyah* was the darkest period in the history of Arabian Peninsula. Disorder and chaos—political, social, moral and cultural, gripped the land of Arabia, “The *Jahiliyyah* period of Arab history presents a very dismal picture which is characterized by utter display of chaos and confusion in all walks of life” (Khan348). Arabia in those days became the hotbed of injustice, inequality, slavery, drinking, usury, gambling, and skirmishes (354). Women were treated like sex slaves, commodities and properties. They had no independence, could not own property and were not allowed to inherit. The practice of killing girl child was rampant. Pre-Islamic Arabs used to bury their daughters alive, “...Arab *Jahiliyyah* society were willing to bury their daughters alive...” (Hanapi216). *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* records the barbarism of the *Jahiliyyah* period hence, “The human brute, almost without sense, is poorly distinguished from the rest of the animal creation” (Deedat14). The moral level of Arabia was utterly low before the coming of Islam. Recounting the moral degradation of *Jahiliyyah*, one of the poets writes, “one who does not defend himself with weapons will perish/ And the one who does not oppress will be oppressed” (Qutb,41).

The poet draws readers' attention towards primitive valour used by people to live and prosper. Therefore, might is right was the way of life of *Jahiliyyah* epoch.

Contextualising *Jahiliyyah*

Historians argue that Islam came in response to *Jahiliyyah* and *Jahiliyyah* ways of life received a death blow with its Islam. Mohd Shukri Hanapi observes, “With the advent of Islam in the year 610 AD, the Arab *Jahiliyyah* society started to change” (Hanapi215). Due to



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rapid and systematic surge of Islam and its preaching in the society, *Jahiliyyah* ways of life were almost uprooted, “All aspect of their life were shaped by the Islamic *tasawwur* (worldview) which encompassed aspects of *aqidah* (faith), *ibadah* (worship) and *akhlaq* (manner)” (215). But this is just another linear understanding of history. No historical trend ever gets eliminated in its entirety. There are always manifestations of preceding regime which resurface and function as alloys to new ways of life. In this sense, *Jahiliyyah* was not thoroughly eliminated rather “buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemisation” with the advent of Islam in seventh century (Foucault 81). *Jahiliyyah* left behind its own eternal legacy and therefore, an ensuing conflict is the order of day even today. Even after Islam became the life blood of the people across the world, remnants of *Jahiliyyah* are still to be found in the societies of Muslims.

Contemporary Muslim societies are in the tight grip of *Jahiliyyah* like fictitious owl of Minerva as enunciated by Hegel. The presence of *Jahiliyyah* is rampant in the present scenario due to the rise of deviated religious leaders like Pir Sain (Pir Sain is the antagonist and husband to the protagonist Heer of the novel *Blasphemy*) in the novel *Blasphemy*. The reassertion of *Jahiliyyah* led by Pir Sain (Pir is worshipped by the masses and he seems to be the “Lat” of the age of *Jahiliyyah*) can rightly be summed up in Michel Foucault’s terminology “*insurrection of subjugated knowledge*” (Foucault 81). Although, it (*Jahiliyyah*) is rampant but it is really hard to distinguish between Islamic practices and the practices of *Jahiliyyah* for Muslims across the globe, for *Jahiliyyah* is working in disguise. *Jahiliyyah* is projected in the garb of Islam to the masses by some misguided ‘Muslims’ like Pir Sain in *Blasphemy*, and people accept it without putting it to the test. The common form of *Jahiliyyah* in the present scenario could be found in the form of oppression and exploitation of women, denying opportunity of education to girl, commodification of woman, and so on.

Commodification of woman as a form of *Jahiliyyah*

In general parlance Parity between genders is supposed to be the ideal state of a society. Yet, equality between genders remains an unfulfilled issue since long time back. Steps have been taken to address gender disparity time and again but there seems to be a little improvement in this regard. Although, Islamic scriptures lay down certain parameters, “O



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mankind! We have created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other [not that ye may despise (each other)]. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)” (Qur’an 49:13), to bring gender parity in the society, yet ‘Muslim society’ under the influence of *Jahiliyyah* civilization seems to have turned a deaf ear to the Islamic injunction. On the contrary, ‘Muslim society’ degrades women in every way and commodification of women is one such instance of *Jahiliyyah* among others which has been instrumental to this gender disparity. Therefore, it is essential to look into this gender disparity driven by *Jahiliyyah* practices with fresh eyes once again.

Commodity is defined as the basic tenant of wealth. In context of capitalism a commodity is that which satisfies a need with both the use-value and exchange-value attached to it. Furthermore, a commodity is also thought of as an object that has a value and could be exchanged or traded in a market. In contemporary society a woman is generally considered to be a commodity and an object which satisfies the needs of males (Yee 20). This way of attaching use-value and exchange-value to women’s body is called objectification of women. Objectification of women in patriarchy is an old phenomenon where women is commonly identified with their body and treated as an object of sex and desire. This objectification of women is instrumental to the Commodification of female body and sexuality. Commodification is a process of adding material value to some elements, objects and beings which were free from the cycle of valuation previously. This process of bringing things into the cycle of valuation has no doubt its own value, but it is counterproductive to the existence of women as a subject or an independent being. Grippled in treacherous valuation process, language, culture, mores, and even women’s body gets commodified. Luce Irigaray, a radical feminist, too opines in her seminal book titled *This Sex Which Is Not One* that, “For woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity” (Saguaro 266). This sickness of commodification of women’s body is hardly a new proposition. A cursory look at historical facts asserts that it was present even in the age of *Jahiliyyah* where women were treated as a possession and object, “Thus, the woman in



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pre-Islamic was treated most of the time, as if she were an article of merchandise to be sold” (Sulaimani13). Furthermore, in times of war, women were treated as part of the loot as well as a tool to bring more and more ransom, “Ancient Arabs valued the capture of hostages and women above that of cattle and booty, since the former were far more profitable to them” (Sulaimani 11). In short, women’s condition was really miserable and deplorable, therefore, it is safe to claim that pre-Islamic or *Jahiliyyah* society treated fair sex worst than an animal.

Tehmina Durrani believes that the *Jahiliyyah* ways crept into the society of Muslims long back, but this time around it is trying to become the life blood of people and push the Islamic injunction on the edge. Hence, the author recounts many instances in her novel *Blasphemy* which fuel the narrative of commodification in the society. In the very beginning of the novel she unknots the material aspect of the marriage at the hands of the mother of the bride (Heer) wherein a young girl of fifteen years old is thrown into the hands of a man called Pir Sain “much older than” the bride or “maybe eighteen years or so” (*Blasphemy* 24). The bride named Heer tried to put up resistance to this authoritarian and materialistic decision of her mother, “I don’t want to get married so soon” but of no avail, hence, she herself bewails, “Ma had made a choice about the rest of my life” (25). Heer’s mother didn’t consider her choice worthwhile because she is intended to get material prosperity and social respect out of this marriage. The mother considered Heer nothing more than a commodity or an object which could fetch material benefits in return. Overpowered by the material achievement, she says, “Your marriage will restore our dignity in the community. Your sisters will marry well and your brother will get a good girl and a good job. Our status will improve tremendously” (25). Precisely, she used Heer as bait to get prosperity and dignity and in this human trade she throws her in the virtual hell which is explicitly an affront to human dignity and integrity, let alone Islam. Durrani seeks to underscore that Heer’s mother enacted *Jahiliyyah* way of life in getting her daughter marry to a “Lat” (Sulaimani06) like Pir Sain. Although, Heer’s mother seems to be guilty on the face of it but it could be argued that she is only the tip of the iceberg, rather the entire society itself should be held responsible which breeds this kind of mentality instead. Therefore, the author makes Heer’s mother unveil the biased or gendered parameters of the society, “After your father’s death, people did not think we were worth



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anything” (25). The author tries to emphasize that it is due to the male that women get respect. Once the male or head of the family is gone, that family loses its respect and credibility.

The author narrates yet another instance of commodification of a young girl called Cheel. This young girl suffers the worst kind of exploitation and commodification in the novel. She was sold more than once and strangely enough she was sold for the first time by none other than her father himself. She relates, ““I was twelve years old when he (father to Cheel) sold me for four thousand rupees to a tribal *badmaash* (a hooligan) who locked me in a room on a hill. He sold me to anyone who would pay, by barter it not currency” (*Blasphemy* 154). Selling girl is nothing but a brute and uncivilized act which was common in the days of *Jahiliyyah*, “Alternatively, when a man did not want to marry his woman captive, he might sell her; in Mecca, there was a market place for selling slaves” (Sulaimani, 13). This is the most shameful and inhuman act which a girl had to face. Although, Islam claims, “Only a man of noble character will honour woman, and only a man of base intentions will dishonour them”(Khan17), yet the dignity of a young girl is being ripped apart under the guidance of *Jahiliyyah*. Witnessing this worst commodification of the young girl called Cheel, Durrani lashes out at the so called Muslims and Muslim societies thus, “They led us back to the time of *Jahalia*, back to the conditions our prophet had freed us from, back to the very reason that had called for Islam” (103). Here Durrani makes it starkly clear that so called defenders and Muslims took Muslim societies back to the days of de facto *Jahiliyyah*. She also unknots that Islam came in response to this kind of *Jahiliyyah* practices prevalent in the days of *Jahiliyyah*.

Islamic teachings with respect to women are very much intended to bring parity between the genders instead of fuelling the narrative of commodification. In fact, Islam claims, “And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them” (Qur’an 02:228). Islam never projects woman as a commodity instead it considers women to be an individual having free will to decide on their own. In truth Islam discourages *Jahiliyyah* practice of commodification or taking women as a possession, on the contrary Islam says: “O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor ye should treat them with harshness” (Qur’an 4:19). To



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conclude, one could argue that namesake ‘Muslim societies’ do consider women to be a commodity under the influence of *Jahiliyyah*. This is worth mentioning here that *Jahiliyyah* practice is gravely inhuman and primitive to women’s dignity on the one hand. On the other, *Jahiliyyah* puts true Islamic credibility and existence at stake because people mistakenly construe it to be “Islamic”.

Denying education to fair sex as a form of *Jahiliyyah*

Education is a must need for human being. It works as a beacon light for humanity and leads them from darkness to light. Therefore, Islam gives utmost emphasis on education in its philosophy, “Proclaim! (or read) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created-” (Qur’an 96:01). In past, women at large have been denied this fundamental right since long time back. Denying education to fair sex is a phallocentric attempt to keep them in the world of ignorance and this attempt runs counter to what modern civilised society and Islam for that matter stands for. This gendered attempt is yet another feature of *Jahiliyyah* prevalent in the ‘Muslim’ societies. Pir Sain, a devil in human form is similar to another devil called ‘Lat’ of the age of *Jahiliyyah*, pretends himself to be the champion of Islamic preachings but his pseudo-Islamic deeds equate him to be the protagonist of *Jahiliyyah*. This Satan like Pir Sain does everything to make *Jahiliyyah* prevail in the Muslim societies. True to his satanic design, Pir does not allow fair sex to read the translation of Qur’an. The author exposes this wicked design of Pir in *Blasphemy* through a conversation between Pir’s mother, wife and his little daughter called Guppi. Guppi was asked to read Qur’an in the original (Arabic) language and she does read it but she doesn’t understand the meaning, therefore she asks her grandmother to explain the reason why she is not allowed to read the translation but her grandmother fails to answer (*Blasphemy* 104). She poses the same question to her mother and there she gets to know the wicked intention of persons like Pir. Protagonist (Heer) answers her daughter thus, “...if our Holy Book was understood, it would cause an uprising. Its content was dangerous. It exposed those who exploited it. The translation could make a revolution” (105). In a broader purview this implies that men folk under the influence of *Jahiliyyah* want to have full control over fair sex. They don’t allow their women to get acquainted with the message of God laid down in the scriptures. Fair sex are being kept away



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from attaining the scriptural knowledge so that they could not know their rights enshrined there. In this way they – women at large, will be oppressed and will never raise their voice because they would think that this is the message of Almighty, hence they are destined to it.

As opposed to *Jahiliyyah*, Islam gives a lot of emphasis on attaining all sorts of constructive knowledge. In fact, it believes education to be the light of life; therefore numerous instances are available in both Qur'an and the Hadith. In Qur'an the very first message given to humanity by Almighty is about gaining knowledge, "Read! In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher," (96:01) Hence, Islam does not restrict anyone from gaining knowledge rather it makes obligatory for everyone to gain knowledge. In spite of Qur'an, Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad^(pbuh) also speaks highly about education. There is a saying where Prophet says, "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Ibn Majah 224). In the light of Islamic injunctions, Tehmina Durrani tries to unearth the devilish design and phallocentric approach of Pir Sain wherein fair sex are being denied their fundamental right to education.

Consequently, it can be argued that Pir is not a pro-Islamic scholar nor does he execute Islamic preachings. In fact, his deeds are pro-*Jahiliyyah* and he strives hard to unleash *Jahiliyyah* practices upon Muslims. Finally, the author wants to underscore that the only way which can make women free from the clutches of oppression is to make them aware of their rights allotted to them in Qur'an and Hadith. This will only be possible when the translation along with original text of Qur'an is made compulsory. Thus, understanding Qur'an is like inhaling oxygen for Muslims including women and this will help eliminate injustice, oppression, exploitation of women to a large extent.

Conclusion

Tehmina Durrani's trailblazing criticism and valuable suggestion remains very much relevant to the present precarious condition of Muslim societies. The entire study finds that the people are unaware of the values of Islam. They only rely on the hypocrite scholars who misguide them to fulfil their ulterior motives. Because of the ignorance towards their faith and belief in Pir Sain, they are subjected to severe miseries. On the basis of the present



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examination, the study reaches at the conclusion which implies that the responsible leaders (Like Durrani) of Islam must arm Muslims with the authentic knowledge of the scriptures of Islam so that they can't be misled and can also guide those people who have strayed from the true path. Beside Islamic education, the Muslim world needs to pay attention to science, technology, so that they can walk with the world. Further the society needs to give space to women, because Muslim women seem to be completely cut off from the mainstream society. Cutting women off from the mainstream of society is the biggest problem in Muslim societies. The women can't raise their voice unless they undergo conversation with different walks of people. It is through conversation, debate and exchange of ideas with other people of the society, Muslim woman can know the way of the world. Conversation with different kinds of people will provide them courage and insight to face and know the society inside out and question them.

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