

## Deterioration of Self, Emotions and Islamic Values: A Critical Survey of Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*

Adiba Iqbal<sup>1</sup>, Sidra Arshad<sup>2</sup>, Sana Zaib<sup>3</sup>

Institute of English and Modern Languages, G. C. University, Faisalabad,  
PAKISTAN.

<sup>1</sup> [iqbalgcwm@gmail.com](mailto:iqbalgcwm@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*Self-identity is the way one looks at oneself and one's relationship to the world. This allows a person to examine who he/she is and more importantly create who he/she wants to be. Blasphemy, Durrani's second major work, is a serious comment on the challenges about dying self-identity faced by Muslim societies especially by women. It is a commentary not on Islam but on the so-called religious leaders who are the main source in exploiting the true spirit of Islam. The present study is done under what postmodernism said about the life of human beings in this age. Postmodernism, in recent years, has decentered oneness of the universe and created disorder in human life. In the same context the present study looks the novel as an agonizing study of evil; an uncompromising look at the distortion of Islam by voracious religious leaders. The purpose of the study is to highlight the tragic story of the protagonist Heer, and how she is dehumanized and dishonored by Pir Sain, the man of God, whom she is married to when barely fifteen. In the Pir's haveli, unspeakable horrors are perpetrated every day and every night, all in the name of Allah. Gulped into the stinking hell of her lord's making, Heer loses her self-respect, her freedom, even her humanity.*

**Keywords:** Self-identity; Blasphemy; Tehmina Durrani; Islam; Postmodernism; Dehumanization; Self-respect: freedom; Deterioration

### INTRODUCTION

The study examines the theme of death of moral values, emotions, identity and the most importantly death of Islamic values. It discusses the exploitation of the society especially women by Pir Sain in Tehmina Durrani's novel *Blasphemy*. Tehmina Durrani's 1998 novel, *Blasphemy*, explores the world of a Muslim Pir's (Sufi Saint) household. Located in rural Pakistan, the novel obliterates the male world from view by Heer, the wife of the Pir. Written in the first person, the novel takes Heer's perspective; she is married to Pir Sain, the village's Sufi leader, against her wishes. She recounts her mistreatment at his hands, using a circular, spiraling storytelling method reminiscent of oral narratives. The novel introduces a world of intense isolation, sexual abuse and religious hypocrisy dominated by a sadistic patriarch, the Pir. The novel has been compared to Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin's accusations of the Muslim clergy, and is available in Urdu under the title *Laanat* [insult] (Hussain M. n. pag.). *Blasphemy* depicts the struggle of a Muslim woman against all that contrary to what Islam stands for. The present study intends that *Blasphemy* is framed by accounts of death and destruction or attempts at destruction of not only Pir Sain's physical death but spiritual and moral death also.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Durrani's *Blasphemy* is a blend of fact and fiction, it has been studied as an exposure of the Pakistani Maulanas and shown to the whole world how the Muslim religious ministry exploits the Muslim masses behind the concealment of Islamic religious traditions. The novel

generated some controversy, and it was feared that it might be banned in Pakistan for its condemnation of the sufi pirs of Pakistan (Siddiqi n. pag.). However, as Kamal Siddiqi points out, the novel “will make little difference in either their (the pirs) lives or the status that they enjoy. One reason is that the book is in English a language read by less than one per cent of Pakistanis. And the very fact that it is a book gives cause for comfort: thanks to the efforts of zamindars (landowners) and other interests, over 72 per cent of Pakistanis are illiterate today”. The present study intends to address these issues in addition to highlight how the self and emotions of human beings especially of women and Islamic values are dying in the hands of religious pirs.

The novel has also been studied as a representative of the veiling and segregation practice in rural Pakistan. It has also been interpreted that Durrani’s construction of a particular kind of zenana show that the veil (burqa and chador in *Blasphemy*) and the purdah system are inherently linked to women’s sense of identity and of identification with specific economic and class structures, consent with which is key to women’s survival in Pakistan’s rural patriarchy. But the present study intends to explore how this sense of identity is polluted under the guise of religious cloak.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The intended research is qualitative by nature; thick descriptive method of analyzing the text is used as methodology. The critical survey of the novel is done in the light of postmodernism and feminism under Islamic laws. The original text of the novel is the basic tool of the researcher, although other related literary texts, critical books, journal articles and electronic media has been used as secondary source of help by the researcher.

## DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL SURVEY OF THE TEXT

### Death of Emotions

Emotional death is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that shatter your sense of security, making you feel helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world. *Blasphemy* deals with the emotional death of pir sain’s wife Heer and the emotions of all the people who blindly follow him. It is a common ritual in our society especially in rural society that woman is compelled to marry a person whom she never knows; in our society patriarchal element is very common especially in rural areas. Patriarchy is a social system in which society is organized around male authority figures. In this system fathers have authority over women, children, and property. It implies the institutions of male rule and privilege, and is dependent on female subordination. Most forms of feminism characterizing patriarchy as an unjust social system that is oppressive to women. Carol Pateman argues that the patriarchal distinction "between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection." in patriarchal power, making women into pledges haggled by families for political power. She has to sacrifice her emotions, desires, identity, and education and sometimes even parents also. As in *Blasphemy*, the protagonist, Heer has to marry Pir Sain against her own wish in order to ensure wealth and happiness for the rest of her family. Durrani in the novel has talked about that through Heer’s mother:

We are extremely lucky. After your father’s death, people did not think we were worth anything. 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. I even like his name. It sounds so very powerful. (Durrani, 2000, p. 25)

Heer is “sold” to the Pir, in exchange for money in the form of a large dowry and prestige and in the form of a familial connection with a powerful family by her mother. But contrary to the wishes of her family, they never enjoy the happiness even they lose their daughter. Heer is not allowed to visit her relatives after her marriage. Her husband never let her live and talk to the other female members of his Haveli. She is forced to live an isolated life.

The kitchen was hot; the loneliness complete. There seemed nothing left for me to expect life and yet it had just begun. Was this to last forever? Yes, yes, I cried myself, kneading a ton of dough for tomorrow’s breakfast. Everything confirmed that was forever and not just another night that had passed. (Durrani, 2000, p. 48)

Pir Sain always plays with her emotions and never allows her to go to her parent’s house. Heer often asks him to go to her parents’ house but he always forgot his words. According to Heer:

“He said to me himself. I will send for your mother... I wondered... and reminded him. I will send for her, he repeated. Another month passed... His method was torturous. He was choking me.”(Durrani, 2000, p. 58) Even one day, he asks her to go outside the Haveli. She was very happy. She was not known that where he was taking her. Her happiness was going to be destroyed and her emotions were going to be exploited. She was not aware what the matter was. He took her through the tunnels of the Haveli and presented her as the prostitute to the other men of the city.

Pir sain is not only exploiting the emotions of the people inside his Haveli but the emotions of the other people of the society also. As they come for spiritual guidance to him and they think that he is their best well-wisher to lead them to the Islamic ways of life. But in reality, he is not a spiritual model to be followed. People blindly trust him and they come to him for prayers. They used to come at his shrine even after his death. According to Subhan:

“It is the belief of common people that the saints of God die not, but merely depart from habitation to another.” (Subhan)

They got excessive honor in their lives that are continued to them after their death as clearly depicted in Blasphemy. “The master’s grave is an eternal presence over us. He will look over us forever.” (Durrani, 2000, p. 18)

### **Death of Islamic values**

The novel is a tragic heart rending tale of the helpless victims of the lust of pir sain, cleverly concealed under the guise of Islam. It reveals how the name of Islam is misused in his exploitation of women. Tehmina has in her novel revealed to the whole world how this class of religious apparatus indulges in all the sensual pleasures behind the peripheral of Islam. She has touched the Muslim society’s “painful nerve”. She argued at several places in that book that the real Islam was quite different from the parody of that noble religion paraded by the Jagirdars. It is the mullahs and moulvis who sub serve these feudal elements by lending a religious polish to their lustful exploits.

Tehmina writes in her novel when Heer’s son attains the prime of youth, pir forces him to marry a girl who was the victim of pir’s sexual atrocities under the very religious umbrella of pir sain. Heer’s 2<sup>nd</sup> son is compelled to marry a girl who happened to be his biological sister.

The role of religious leader of Sindh has been a complex and changing one, as Heer takes pains to point out with in the novel. In *Sufi Saints and State Power*, Sara Ansari points out the two types of Muslim religious leaders; the ‘Ulma’ and ‘Sufi Saint’.

“Sufi Saints sought to gain knowledge of God in their hearts because they emphasize on spiritual growth rather than on the letter of God’s law. For these reason they often tended to stand aloof from state power and its representative (Ansari, 1992, p. 4).

We can see the hypocrisy of Pir Sain towards religion that he always indulges in sexuality and bad things but on the other side of the picture, he considers himself the best model of behavior on the example of Holly Prophet (PBUH). Blasphemy fore grounds this abuse power of Pir Sain and people’s acceptance of his right to tyranny given the deep roots of religious believers and shrine worship. According to subhan “while the Sufis, in virtues of God’s chosen people are looked upon as elect of the Muslims, the Saints, in virtue of being God’s friends are regarded as the elect of Sufis”.

Islamic values are exploited at the very start of the novel when Heer enters in the house for the 1<sup>st</sup> time and everyone bows down before them. People are not allowed to walk before them. They always use to walk behind Pir and Heer. According to Heer: “women congratulated her, touched my feet, and prayed for Pir sain’s happiness, they walked behind us, beside us but never in front of us” (Durrani, 2000, p. 36)

Sufism as the path of enlightenment evolved in India and Pakistan is strictly regulated among the rural societies especially. The Murreed or disciple is required by these so-called pirs or Sufis to follow them blindly who are exploiting the true spirit of religion and the shrines of the holy figures and Durrani’s *Blasphemy* is a clear representation of that path.

The Shrine is a symbol of all exploitation. If men can use Allah against the weak, all other means are lesser and easier to exploit. If we make a war against this Shrine, every truth will be served. (Durrani, 2000, p. 196)

### **Dying Self Identities**

Durrani introduces a world of deep seclusion, erotic exploitation and spiritual duplicity in her novel *Blasphemy* in which almost every major character has to lose his or her identity under the protection of so-called pious sovereignty of Pir Sain. All female characters of the novel have no individual personality for their own self. They all are subordinate to Pir Sain. All the female servants in and around the *haveli* and Pir’s wives have to obey him. They are never permitted to think about their true identity and chastity. They become a victim of Pir’s everyday sexual pleasures. These women even young girls have no right to oppose to Pir Sain’s words, as Durrani shows through Heer’s words:

Both girls would be dragged in and praying for mercy, they would end up begging for death if it ended the pain...Although I realized that there was no way on earth to avoid his wrath, I compromised myself even further. Everyone held on to hope that he might feel sorry for the victim. That never happened. (Durrani, 2000, p. 52)

Heer the heroin of the novel also has to face identical crises throughout the novel. She is in Pir’s bondage. The only time she leaves the physical confines of her home she has to lose her identity and even her name, Pir renames her *Piyari* instead of a pure woman he introduces her as prostitute from the city to the men he brings into his “sanctified” bedroom. “It allowed them to introduce me as a whore from the city because no one ever had laid eyes on the venerable wife of the pir”. (Durrani, 164) She becomes a pimp for her husband to survive at that place. Pir Sain forces her to submit to the sexual demands of his clients.

Red lipstick, penciled eyebrow, a heavy perfume and I took on the persona of a legalized prostitute...Pir Sain called me *Piyari* and introduced me to pleasure his friend”. (Durrani, 2000, p. 165)

Heer the victim of all cruelties of pir sain has to suffer the death of her true self not only in the hands of her husband but her son for whom she has bear all these brutalities also considers her a whore and gives her no honor and respect: He hissed me like his father, 'you have no right to interfere in my life. I can look up at no man because my mother is a whore.' (Durrani, 2000, p. 204) The novel chronicles the sexual shenanigans of Pir Sain, a sexual lecher, wolf in a sheep's skin ostensibly performing religious duties. Pir's own personality is also Centre less and dwindling. The Pir is portrayed as an all-powerful man whose authority over his own world remains unchallenged. He orchestrates people's lives from a distance. His involvement in Pakistan politics for example, is portrayed to be that of a master puppeteer. All religious leaders in Pakistan support their favorite candidate and orchestrate issues of state without getting involved in politics directly.

To gain victories in elections and become ministers or prime ministers many aspiring politicians also sought his help. His influence was not restricted to his own area; it was loosely scattered across the country. Pockets of Pir Sain's *mureeds* (followers) lived in the most forsaken places and considered a pilgrimage to him as divine summons. His followers voted where he instructed them to, and that gave him permanent power in the capital. (Durrani, 2000, p. 63)

Pir Sain is revered as a religious leader, people consider him as the source of their spiritual guidance but contrary to this argument in actual and for Heer he is something else. His behavior towards his wife and daughters is critiqued by Heer as non-religious and at times as even anti-religious:

To me, my husband was my son's murderer. He was also my daughter's molester. A parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night. He was bhai's destroyer, Amma Sain's tormentor, Ma's humbler and the people's exploiter. He was the rapist of orphans and the fiend that fed on the weak. But over and above all this, he was known to be the man closest to Allah, the one who could reach Him and save us. (Durrani, 2000, p.143)

## CONCLUSION

*Blasphemy* is a serious comment on the challenges faced by Muslim societies in general and Muslim women in particular. The shattering identities, the decline of Islamic values and the deterioration of emotions in it are a commentary not on Islam but on the struggle of Muslim women against all that is contrary to what Islam stands for. Consequently, under the light of above critical survey *Blasphemy* is a shocking exposure of the deep effect of malice, sex and violence which come to gather in deteriorating identities on a rural and illiterate people. Though it seems unbelievable yet it remains a reality which is done under the disguise of Islam or shrine in our rural societies. This is a sad comment on the moral discernment of Muslim society living in the entire Pakistan.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Ansari, S. (1992). *Sufi Saints and State Power: The Pirs of Sind, 1843-1947*. Cambridge UP.
- [2] Durrani, T. (2000). *Blasphemy*. Lahore: Ferozsons Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- [3] Hussain, M. (1998, **November 22**). “Blasphemy - After Taslima Nasareen’s Lajja Tehmina Durrani’s.” *Organiser*.
- [4] Lyotard, J-F. (2006). *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*. Eds. Keith Chrome and James Williams. New York: Columbia UP.
- [5] Fedwa Malti-Douglas (2007). *MacMillan Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*. Detroit : Macmillan Reference,. (p.1104).
- [6] Pateman, C. (1988). *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [7] Siddiqi, K. (1998, **October 23**). “Of Pir Power and Peccadilloes: Blasphemy Reveals the Rot Within”. *Indian Express Newspapers*.
- [8] Subhan, J. A. (1999). *Sufism, Its Saints and Shrines: An Introduction to the Study of Sufism with Special Reference to India and Pakistan* (2nd ed.). New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.
- [9] <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1664&context=etd>