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## Unveiling the Veiled: An Islamic Feminist Reading of Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*

**Shama Bee**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Aligarh Muslim University,  
Aligarh, (UP), India.

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper aims to study Tehmina Durrani's novel, *Blasphemy* through the lens of Islamic feminism. The paper attempts to explore the misinterpretation of Islamic teachings and texts by some religious leaders, saints, *Mullah*, and the so-called pious *Pirs* in Muslim societies who use religion for their own benefits. Muslim women live under the inflexible and tenacious boundaries of religion, which has always pushed them to exploitation and marginalization. In her novel *Blasphemy*, Durrani presents the case of Muslim women exploited by the patriarchs like Pir Sain, a Holy *Pir* in rural society of Pakistan. Durrani dared to expose one of the zones that remains taboo for most populace of the Islamic countries. Through the distorted version of Islam, these so-called pious *Pirs* misguide the poor and innocent. The present paper will explore the distorted version of Islam and the man-made religious practices.

**Keywords:** Islam, Women, Islamic feminism, misinterpretations, exploitation, gender justice, distorted version of Islam.

Tehmina Durrani (1953-) is a notable Pakistani writer well acknowledged for her much-admired autobiographical account, *My Feudal Lord: A Devastating Indictment of Women's Role in Muslim Society* (1994). She received many literary awards including, the Italian Marisa Bellisario Prize. Her other well-known fiction, *Blasphemy: a novel* (1998), expounds on the sacrilegious use of Islam and its distorted version used by the Muslim males and spiritual leaders to subjugate the womenfolk in the novel. The powerful *Mullah-Pirs* like Pir Sain exploited women in the name of Islam. In the name of Islam, people like Pir Sain control women's freedom and force them to live in such a situation where they are considered mere

sex objects. She breaks the long-aged silence and oppression by disclosing her life experiences in Muslim society. In an interview, she says, "The real oppression on women is that they must not speak. And doing something as unconventional as writing a book, makes you into a woman who doesn't have modesty". (Durrani 01) Subsequently, Tehmina Durrani's renowned work, *Blasphemy*, makes a prevailing feminist tract highlighting, inspecting, and decrying the 'man-made religion.'

Islamic Feminism is a different approach towards religion-oriented reading and considers religious and sacred scriptures from the female perspectives. It aims to seek gender justice, equality, and freedom within the religious framework. There is a strong need for gender-sensitive reading of religious and sacred texts in the present conditions for re-examination, re-locating, and re-interpreting these religious and sacred manuscripts from a female's point of view. Islamic Feminism encourages independent, rational thinking and logical reasoning of the sacred texts. Hence, Islamic Feminism advocates the reconstruction and transformation of religious thoughts. It talks about the re-reading of religious scriptures for an egalitarian mode of life. It attributes new magnitudes to the history of the feminist movements worldwide.

Dr. Margot Badran defines Islamic Feminism as:

"...discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all Insan (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions and everyday life. It rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence, or fiqh) conceptualising a holistic umma in which Quranic ideals are operative in all space." (242)

Islamic feminists also condemn the cultural practices which are propagated in the name of Islam. Durrani, in her novel *Blasphemy* revealed the un-Islamic practices and the unspeakable horror in Pir's *haveli*, perpetuated all the time in the name of Allah. She highlighted the man-made religious practices followed by Pir Sain. Heer, the protagonist of the novel who dared to fight against the evil perpetrated by the so-called the most pious and sacred *Pir*, named Pir Sain. She challenged the practice of the *Shrine* system. She has suffered a lot

for transgressing the veiled and enclosed matters of Muslim women's life. She had to pay a high price for her rebellion. The consequences of Heer's revolt against the 'shrine worship' is expressed in the following words:

"Your life is under threat. You challenged the Shrine. You break their epitaphs and chop the hands that rise before the graves of mad men. The matte is not a simple domestic one. You did not understand the consequences of taking on the devil in his private domain and a member of his hell." (Durrani 222)

Heer, the protagonist of the novel experiences the hypocrisy of the so-called holy *pir* Pir Sain and his painful treatment of the women of the *haveli*. Though Islam teaches for the kind treatment of women, Pir Sain treats her wife like a beast. She states,

"He pushed me to the floor, his foot crushed my face.... Pir Sain shouted for scissors. He sat on a chair, pulled me down between his legs and gripped my temples with his knees. My eyes bulged out at the ceiling. Time stood still to the sound of snipping. He shouted for a razor. Time froze to the sound of scraping. The razor ran across my scalp. Flung across the room, I saw him coil towards me like torrid lava. Flat on my back. My stomach protruded. Inside it, my baby kicked. Over it, the father descended. Night became day; day became night; another day blazed until another night came and went and blue broke through black again. My child pushed against his thrusts. He was still inside and the baby was coming out." (Durrani 71)

She witnesses the sexual exploitation of vulnerable women who are powerless, poor, widow, and orphans. They came to the *haveli* to seek the mercy of Pir Sain. He used even teenage girls in order to content his sexual pleasure as Heer says, "A wounded baby deer with frightened eyes lay on the floor. Her mouth was stuffed with his handkerchief, her child-like breasts bore teeth marks. The rest of her body was covered with a sheet" (Durrani 112). On the contrary, Islam talks about the right and safety of poor and orphans' women as, "Therefore, treat not the orphan with harshness" (Qur'an: 93:09). *Blasphemy* is a lamentation for the dogmas of the blind faith of the followers for the corrupt *Pirs* like Pir Sain, who plays with their faith in the name of religion. Pir Sain's village people consider him pious, but he turns

out to be the nastiest and exploits their religious sentiments. His real character explained by his wife, Heer,

“To me, my husband was my son's murderer. He was also my daughter's molester. 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 143)

Pir Sain claimed that he is the selected one who has the power to communicate with Allah because of his holy ancestry. He has a direct link with the Prophet's ancestry. However, Islam negates the concept of any link between human beings and the almighty and states: “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). In *Blasphemy*, Tehmina Durrani uncovered the corrupt and immoral system of 'shrine'. She raised her voice against the distorted version of Islam. She asserts, “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 the Shrine, every truth will be served.” (Durrani 196).

Pir Sain and his son Rajaji, who was later placed at his father Pir Sain's position, is immoral and wicked. Their deeds are not matched with the truly pious and religious people, as Toti, a ghost appears in the novel, reveals,

“Are they not directly descended from the Prophet? Are they not especially blessed by Allah because of their holy ancestry? Toti laughed at me and asked a question that gave me the answer. Do their actions in any way reflect our Prophet's greatness? Do they, in fact, not resemble the Prophet's bitterest enemies? They are impostors, imposed upon our hearts. They exploit our ignorance our poverty, our losses and our limitations to rule over us. The shrine is mercenary and political, it is not holy.’ I was struck by Toti's boldness. She was impertinent like nobody here dared be.” (Durrani 88)

Keddie also points out the same arguments as,

“In some cases, the practices of Muslims run directly counter to the teachings of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad. Since they were introduced, Islamic religious texts have been interpreted almost exclusively by men who selectively construed their teachings such that they consolidated the power of men in society in an attempt to keep women under the control of the established patriarchy”. (Keddie 86)

Pir Sain limits the accessibility of Islamic texts to women in the *haveli*. Women in the *haveli* are not permitted the Urdu translation of the Qur’an. They have accessibility only for Arabic recitation. Pir Sain’s daughter Guppi illustrates as “.... I don’t understand Arabic. How can I commit myself to Allah without knowing what I commit to? How can I make a promise without knowing what to keep? Allah knows that I don’t understand what I read”. (Durrani 104).

On the contrary, Islam encourages acquiring the knowledge for better co-existence of males and females in society. Biological differences are discouraged in Islam, but in *Blasphemy*, these differences are promoted. Amina Wadud rightly argued that in the Qu’ran, a person’s superiority is not determined by their gender. Rather, it is based on *taqwa*, the God-consciousness. In the book, *Qur'an and Woman Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspectives*, she particularizes her argument,

“The distinguishing value from Allah’s perspective is *taqwa* (piety). Provided that *taqwa* is understood in both its action and attitude dimensions, this verse is self-explanatory. Allah does not distinguish on the basis of wealth, nationality, sex, or historical context, but on the basis of *taqwa*. It is from this perspective then that all distinctions between woman and woman, between man and man, and between woman and man, must be analysed”. (Wadud 37)

Women in the *haveli* are treated like animals on the basis of their biological differences. Heer, the protagonist of the novel, is locked and beaten brutally by her son, Raja Ji, for transgressing the sacred, for disclosing the reality of Pir Sain and bringing the corrupt shrine practice to the public. Durrani expresses the heart-rendering conditions of women in *Blasphemy* and states, “Kaali, Tara, Toti, Yathimri, Cheel and me. Women, as sisters, daughters, wives, and mothers transformed into bubbles and burst.” (Durrani 222)

The hypocrisy of Pir Sain is expressed here that, on the one hand, a secluded place *haveli* is made for women to stay, while on the other hand, he forces his wife to submit herself to his guests for sexual pleasure. He renamed her *Piyari* instead of pure woman, the wife of Holy Pir. He presented her as a prostitute, as she states, "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 further expresses her agony in the following words "Red Lipsticks, pencil eyebrow, a heavy perfume and I took on the persona of a prostitute... Pir Sain called me *Piyari* and introduced me to pleasure his friend." (Durrani 165). Heer's pain and agony are expressed here how she is sexually exploited by her own husband, the Pious-Holy Pir. He is so sacred and pious in the eyes of his village people who followed him that they came to seek his guidance and blessings. But the reality is well expressed and exposed by the innocent, helpless, the most wretched wife, Heer as:

"These custodians of the people, revered for adherence to the faith, were concealing their sin under my *burqa*. 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...I was up and down and over the craggy mountain of flesh, thinking only of purdah draping the sins of men. The *burqa* had become a licence for corrupt men. A tonne of flesh compressed me and I thought of so many women buried under the same crimes. I cried inside myself to the Jagirdar, 'Open your eyes, you idiot! I'm the master's wife. The mother of his children. See me. I'm naked enough.'" (Durrani 164-65)

Distortion of true Islamic values is contrary to what Islam actually stands for. Although it appears unbelievable, it remains a true fact that done under the camouflage of religion in rural Pakistani society. Durrani, in her novels, threatens traditionalism and poses to gender equality in every aspect of Muslim women's life. She proposes that the disruption between the actual Islamic teachings and the practices of Muslim men puts a serious threat to the most important matters of Muslim women's life. Additionally, Islamic scriptures are cautious about women's treatment and recommend the kind treatment of the woman by their men. Despite that, Pir Sain treated his innocent wife, Heer, with extreme cruelty. The protagonist, Heer, after the marriage, fears to express life as per tradition, practice and religion. She explains her fearful plight in the following words:

“Did I sleep that night or was its kind death? We had celebrated it, my loved ones had joyfully sung and danced for it, I had been beautified days ahead for it, enhanced in every possible way. Why? To tempt like a sorceress and unleash upon myself this madness, this cruelty? It seemed evil now. The preparation, the rituals, the ceremony and slaughtered. I had been sacrificed to a God on earth. The contract had signed away my life. Its terms were specified by our faith, sealed with social and familial norms and this, our first night, had been its first dawn. Was this repeated in every corner of the world over and over again? Had this happened to Ma? Under my breath, I was whimpering when he asked, ‘Do you say your prayers?’ I covered. I was hurting and I was petrified. Which was worse, I did not know.” (Durrani 39-40)

Tehmina Durrani faced exploitation at the hands of the foremost powerful regime, and therefore, she is well aware of women’s atrocious plight in the conservative Muslim society. She raised her voice against the exploitations of women in the hands of so-called Islamic preachers, or *Pirs*. Tehmina and the protagonist Heer, in the novel representing the lives of Muslim women under a powerful political and religious regime where their rights are desecrated in the name of Islam. Their life and suffering represent the mirror of every woman who undergoes such a tempestuous life and is incompetent to raise a voice against the discrimination of the patriarchal society. Islam insists that people should apply their logic, reason, and rational thinking before teaching and recommending their way of life; subsequently, they can’t be deluded and oppressed. But *Pirs* like Pir Sain made a false claim of having the direct link to the ancestry of the Prophet. That’s why they are holy and could communicate the miseries of people to the Almighty. Islam encourages learning and acquiring knowledge for men and women, but these so-called preachers such as Pir Sain and Rajaji take religion into their hands and play with it for their gains. They distorted the basic principle of Islam. They, in their milieu not ensuring the accessibility of Islamic scripture to all human beings. With regards to Islam, Pir Sain is perpetuating the Islamic principles and separating the society between the sections of men and women to deteriorate, degrade, and escapade the position of Muslim women in society. According to Baloch, “Islam imparts a fundamental law of social life, equal human rights for individuals in society” (Baloch, 1965). The novel, *Blasphemy*, is a remarkable scandalous outcry of Heer and the profound effect of sadism, sex,

abuse, and physical violence that come together in the deteriorating individualities of innocent rural and uneducated women of Pakistan.

Hence, *Blasphemy* is a tale of a valiant, young and most suffering protagonist named Heer, who exposes the faith of innocent people in the most faithless authority called Pir Sain, who is considered the most sacred person among the people of his village. Durrani, through the story of the protagonist, Heer, exposures the hellish character of a so-called holy man Pir Sain who makes use of his religion to exploit the women in his *haveli*. Heer challenged the very entrenched system of the shrine. She rebelled against the most sacred, pious and Holy person among his people because only she knew the reality of this cruelest and corrupt person. Heer challenged the whole tradition of the practice of shrines and dared to expose the most consecrated Holy *Pir*. In *Blasphemy*, Tehmina Durrani exposed the immorality and corruption of the system of 'Shrine' and uncovered the veiled, distorted version of Islam.

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