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Blasphemy: A Study of Domestic Violence and Trauma

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Abstract:

In modernist fictional narratives, trauma is a reaction to such events which are terrible and painful in nature; victims cannot properly understand or incorporate these events into their normal existence. Violence and trauma can cause various catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of nightmares and other intrusive phenomena. The present research article will focus on various aspects of domestic violence and trauma in Tehmina Durrani's novel *Blasphemy* (1998). It will mainly focus on the traumatic journey of the protagonist Heer and other female characters. It will delve into and analyze the plight and wounded experience in her forced marriage. How, in the marital institution, women are tortured both physically and psychologically underscore the main concern in the narrative through domestic violence and marital rape. Besides, it also highlights how the marital institution is crippled and marred against females by the regressive religious and patriarchal ideology.

Keywords: Domestic violence, trauma, catastrophic events, *Blasphemy*, marital rape.

Anne Whitehead, in her book *Trauma Fiction* (2004) comments, "The term 'trauma fiction' represents a paradox or contradiction: if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativized in fiction?" (3). This study intends to argue that there are numerous approaches to think about how trauma and fiction are related to each other. The emergence of trauma theory has offered new perceptions about trauma for the writers of fiction. This then brings up the relevant political, ethical, and aesthetic concerns. Different cultural groups' desire to represent or draw attention to particular historical traumatic events has given rise to numerous significant modern fiction

novels. We can consider, for instance, Toni Morrison's efforts to obtain political acceptance in recognition of African-Americans' suffering both during and after slavery in novels like *Jazz* (1987) and *Beloved* (1992). The novelists have frequently discovered that the effects of trauma may only be accurately portrayed by copying its forms and symptoms, which cause temporality and chronology to dissolve and give narratives their trademark indirection and recurrence. Whitehead also discusses the literary techniques used by novelists to depict trauma or to narrate the unnarratable, and she also provides an overview of the (necessarily provisional) spectrum of literary devices which describe the new literary sub-genre known as trauma fiction.

The term trauma theory¹ was first established in the 1990s when a group of critics started looking at how trauma affected cultures. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) by Cathy Caruth gained popularity due to the essays and interviews from experts in psychiatry, literature, film, and sociology. Caruth gave a presentation on the principles for comprehending and discussing trauma that has impacted a decade of interdisciplinary research on the issue. With the increase in studies on trauma, the term has been used more broadly to include situations other than those that were originally thought of as traumatising, such as war, natural catastrophe, abuse, and isolation, to include psychological trauma² that might not have been caused by or resulting from physical violence. Caruth comments that, "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (*Unclaimed Experience* 17).

Despite possessing equal positions and rights in most of the nations, violence against women is still prevalent, and homes are often turned into places of torture for women. Domestic violence is one of the most prevalent ways that women are subjected to torture, and it is a serious global socio-economic and public health issue in both advanced and developing nations. Domestic violence is a pattern of oppressive behaviour by an individual upon his or her intimate partner, involving physical, sexual, and psychological violence. The significant effects of violence against women include injuries, physical ailments and signs, and psychological disorders. Physical violence is often associated as a risk factor for a various physical and emotional illnesses. It has been shown to directly affect trauma-related wounds, a number of chronic conditions, and stress-related psychological effects. There is no doubt that experiencing domestic abuse is stressful for adult survivors and their offspring. In the context of the abuser's harassment, domestic violence undoubtedly causes feelings of despair and hopelessness in the

victim. Moreover, all victims of domestic abuse will endure some common behaviour being abused by a loved one. In her book, *Trauma and Recovery (1995)* Judith Herman focused on psychological trauma- characterized by feelings of fear, hopelessness, loss of control, and destruction. Victims of domestic violence mainly undergo these feelings, when they encounter violence from their partners and family. Violence is a great trouble for the victim and also results into trauma. These traumatic experiences typically wound an individual mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Sarah Wood Anderson in her book, *Readings of Trauma, Madness, and the Body (2012)*, mentions the works of feminist critics such as Laura Brown and Judith Herman who, in the early 1990s, highlighted the inequality between genders of trauma affecting men and women in clinical and psychological trauma studies. Both Brown and Herman questioned the male-centred definition of trauma, which claims that “the person has experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience” (as qtd. in Anderson 6). According to Brown, what constitutes human experience is determined by what is commonplace in the lives of white, young, physically fit, educated, middle-class, and Christian men who belong to the dominant class. Trauma only upsets these specific human lives but not any other. It is widely acknowledged that the trauma of war and genocide are the products of patriarchal culture (Anderson 6). Moreover, Brown argues that trauma can arise in some people, in particular life circumstances, from circumstances that appear harmless to others, and that we should be wary of definitions of trauma that try to restrict experience to circumstances are considered to be normal.

The impact of trauma is different on different genders. Previous trauma studies have mainly focused on male-centred experiences of trauma. Even female hysteria³ was judged according to male standards. After lots of studies in the field of trauma, Sarah Wood Anderson has focused mainly on domestic trauma is “trauma that takes place at the site of the domestic, in order to provide a contrast to the more typical representations of war-made, masculine trauma, some of which I will also examine” (6). She analyzes that trauma is found mostly in domestic and civilian life in the lives of women. The impact of trauma on women in civilian life is more than of men in war.

Blasphemy (1998) is the second major work written by Tehmina Durrani after *My Feudal Lord (1991)*. Since its publication, the novel has fascinated readers everywhere. *Blasphemy* is a depressing and traumatic story of physical, sexual, and domestic violence against women.

Tehmina Durrani is a Pakistani English author. She was born on February 18, 1953. She is of Afghan Pathan ancestry and was raised in a well-educated and prominent family. She is the granddaughter of Sir Sikandar Hyat and the daughter of late Shahkur Ullah Durrani, the former governor of the State Bank of Pakistan. In 1991, she penned her autobiography, *My Feudal Lord*, which included details of her traumatic marriage with Mustafa Khar. The book went on to become a best-seller around the world and underwent multiple language translations. *Blasphemy* by Durrani exhibits the worst forms of male violence against women and immoral religious practices. In her novels, she attempted to portray women's on a deeper level. It is a matter of great shock that the patriarchal system is biased where men dominate women. Durrani researched and mentioned the situation of women who were mistreated by men based on patriarchal cultural ideals built around the dominance of men. It highlights the oppressive patriarchal rule that was indirectly responsible for the current situation of women. Violence may emerge from an unforeseen truth that appears to be fatalistic and terrible. The impact of domestic violence has resulted in various traumatic experiences of the protagonist, Heer and the other female characters. Heer mainly undergoes various psychological, physical, and emotional problems which, she cannot heal properly, and as a result, she encounters many traumatic events. According to the author of the book, *Behind Closed Doors- Domestic Violence in India (2004)* being abused, exploited, and sexually attacked by one's spouse is the most demeaning experience a woman can go through. The majority of women who endure such assaults are unaware that domestic violence is a legitimate crime and that countless women across India experience this type of abuse regularly. The author makes the point that women's views are often unheard when their cultures, families, values, and traditions are kept private. They never object or complain, their hushed shouts of horror and trauma remain within the four walls of the home and are ignored by the decision-makers. Madhumita Kishore Dhote's research paper "Feminist Perspective in Durrani's *Blasphemy*" presents Marx's and Engels' perspectives on violence against women. According to her, they argued that the dominant class oppressed women, considered them second-class people in society, and within the domestic sphere and family. They are not treated equally in their families by the people who are emotionally close to them. "The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production" (Dhote 4). Engels takes into account the personal aspects of women's oppression inside the family, including the extreme degradation

suffered by women at the hands of their husbands, with a degree of inequality that had been unknown in pre-class societies. She further mentions:

Engels explicitly argued that rape and violence against women were built into the family at its beginning. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced of servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children, in order to make certain of the wife's fidelity and therefore the paternity of his children. She is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights. (4)

The novel *Blasphemy* became a stark illustration of how, in society and family, males view women as their possessions and property since they are in charge of every aspect of their lives, including their movements and behavior. This novel is the traumatic and painful story of Heer, the main protagonist, who faces brutal torture, and domestic violence by the patriarchal and religious society in which she is trapped. It is a real story of a young girl trapped in the deadliest cage of Pir Sain. The novel not only portrays the violence against Heer but also the plight of other female characters that are not only tormented by Pir Sain, the “Man of God” but also at the same time are subjugated under the religious and patriarchal domain. Heer is a beautiful girl of fifteen years old who holds dreams in her magnetic eyes just like another teenager of her age. According to Engels, the violence against women builds itself in the family, for the painful situation of Heer is the result of her family's decision. She becomes a burden to her widowed mother after the death of her father. She forces her to marry Pir Sain almost double of her age. “Ma’s voice was becoming characteristically shrill. ‘He never married because nobody was good enough for him. He is much older than you, may be eighteen years or so’” (Durrani 24). Her dreams of getting education and marriage with Ranjha are shattered. She is forced to marry Pir Sain because of her family's prosperity and reputation to become a wife of Pir. Her mother believed that they “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” (26). To claim that a woman is being mistreated by a woman who is disguised as her mother inside her home. Taking responsibility of her family, she is ready to accept the marital life with Pir Sain, a man of extraordinary reputation for the people, he is a saint, but he is a Lucifer in the eyes of Heer. The man who pretends to be the god is a demon by nature. Heer is brutally treated by Pir Sain; her

marriage is a series of traumatic experiences both physically and emotionally. She is beaten, humiliated, abused, raped, and forced to live within the four walls of *haveli* where she is not allowed to raise her voice in front of Pir Sain. She is merely an object in the world of her husband made for her.

Women are only a mere instrument of production. Amma Sain prays, “May Allah bless your first steps into our home. May he give you seven sons” (36). This is a clear illustration of the female gender within utilitarian ideology. The value of a woman is more who can give birth to the male child than a woman who cannot. On the other side, women are discriminated by other women in their home, females are not equally treated by the same gender in their families. Just like Amma Sain, despite being a woman who bears neither empathy nor sympathy towards her daughter-in-law. She knows the whole truth that her son Pir Sain is a monster but she does not understand the pain and suffering of other female characters. Instead, she dominates and exploits other female characters in the novel. Amma Sain asserts, “When a wife has secured a hold over her husband’s bed, she can use it on everyone, it’s an art” (55). It means that Heer is only a sex object for her husband, like a professional seductress used in the darkness of night converted into administrative work in the day. She is not treated like a human being; she is only to satisfy the lust of her husband every day and undergoes marital rape at the hands of her husband. Marriage is the union of two people both physically and emotionally, but in the case of Heer, it is an institution of physical and emotional exploitation. Heer explains her situation:

Stripped naked, I felt a mountain of flesh descend on me... the preparation, the rituals, the ceremony, and the slaughter. I had been sacrificed to a god on earth. The contract had signed away my life. Its term was 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? (21)

For Heer, in this world, no choices are permitted, no mistake is forgiven, no reason is applied, and no explanations are given— a world where she is not permitted to do anything without her husband’s permission; she is beaten and humiliated brutally for coming in front of a six-year-old ‘man’. “My first beating in full view of everyone and ended inside. I had also disobeyed Allah by not observing *pardah* from a male whom I could marry. But he was only six years old. Why had Ma not stopped the ashtray from reaching me? Surely, she must have known the implications of such a liberal present” (43). Heer points out the questions about the physical

violence of women— why women are not raising their voices against these injustices upon them; instead, they are saving their husbands with a hundred excuses about the reason behind their husband’s outbursts— employment, frustrations, financial worries and so on and so forth. She always cried out to Allah for his injustices with a particular gender. “We felt he only used the privileges given him by God for having been born a man... the bangles left scars upon my wrists” (43). This is how she is bearing the pain inside her breast, where she has no one to share her feelings with or to talk her heart out. She is living in the house of Pir Sain, where no rules are to be followed except the command of the master. This novel beautifully depicts the ugly side of violence in the patriarchal society and eventually developing trauma.

Manik Mandal, in his article, “A Correlative Study of Violence and Trauma in Meena Kandasamy’s Semi-Autobiographical Novel “When I Hit You” or “A Portrait Of A Writer As A Young Wife”” analyses that the experiences of panic and fear are another critical features of a traumatic victim. We have lots of examples in literature where characters suffer through this kind of experiences. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is the best example in this regard (37). In her novel, she has focused on how the character Sethe suffered from a traumatic situation. She is in great fear that her daughter will not forgive her for the crime that she committed in the past when she was only two years old. In *Blasphemy*, Heer undergoes this feeling of fear and anxiety when she has to protect her daughters from the evil clutches of men, including their father. In the words of Heer, “Pir Sain was walking towards us. Pretending to be asleep, I sniffed his musk to determine his distance. My heart tripped when I smelt him over Guppi. What did he want? Why did he not say anything? Had he discovered her flight? What had she done?” (110).

She experiences the feeling of flashbacks and nightmares— both are the means of traumatic memories stored and accessed differently than typical memories. According to Judith Herman, a feature of traumatic nightmares are that they may be accompanied by the feeling of terror and fear as they are experienced with a sense of immediacy, as if they are occurring in the present. Flashbacks— described as the victims’ acting or recurring feeling as if the traumatic situation is actually happening in the present. May be pointed by small, insignificant smells, sights, sounds, or other reminders; but the flashback experiences are quite horrible for the victim. When Heer knows the truth that her husband has a lustful eye on her daughters, she thinks about Meesni’s secret life, buried in her father’s haveli. It has always haunted her like a ghost. Now, it came alive in the form of fear, shock, anger, and flashbacks spread from her head. She feels

helpless to save her daughters from their father's lust, "I pulled myself up with the weight of Guppi's added burden. Every moment henceforth would be a risk; every night would be a threat. But she had kept well away from him" (111). Every night she goes through these flashbacks, Meesni comes again and again in her eyes through the various nightmares and ghosts. It also resulted in crime when she offered an orphan child, Yathimri, to satisfy her husband's lust. After offering the innocent girl, Yathimri to her husband, the image of Yathimri's dead mother flashes repeatedly in front of her eyes. She understands the crime that she has committed and feels guilty as if a wounded baby watching with frightened eyes lies on the floor. Her mouth closed with his handkerchief, and her body was naked (112-113). The girl goes through hysteria for some moment. She undergoes through the trauma physical, psychological and emotional shocks.

Intrusive thoughts are such thoughts in which victims find themselves spending a lot of time thinking about the traumatic events, whether they want to or not. They might be doing something else, and suddenly, a flood of images or emotions related to the trauma that seems beyond their control emerges. They are forever afraid that something will occur, which they desperately want to escape. In many situations, in this novel, Heer goes through these intrusive thoughts where she is already thinking about a traumatic situation that does not exist in the present. She always thinks about her daughters that Pir Sain has lusty eyes upon them, and also in another event she also thinks about her son Chote Sain. When she knows the truth that Chote Sain spent last night with Yathimri, she goes through various intrusive thoughts in her mind, "O Allah! Have mercy on us,' I prayed in my heart. If Pir Sain finds out, he would kill Chote Sain" (133). She thinks about the future events that haunt her, "Whenever I survived one killer wave, another one lashed out at me. I wanted to be buried in the deep but had to save my son" (134).

In conclusion, *Blasphemy* explores not just the brutality, domestic violence, and traumatic experiences of women but also how a woman may confront a patriarchal culture. The work also depicts the various adverse effects of violence. Heer, the protagonist of this novel, suffered horrendous treatment that caused her to lose her humanity, independence, dignity, and virginity. With the sacrifice of Yathimri and other girls made to save her daughters which is considered to be the worst crime she committed while under the influence of violence. She also describes several situations in which she attempted to keep herself and her children safe. Even though she sometimes failed to defend herself and her kids, in the end, she managed to escape Pir Sain's haveli's grasp. The story sheds light on a common problem: the pressure a woman feels in a

patriarchal and religious society. Through the patriarchal structures, society and religion abuse and torture the females particularly enslaving the weakest members of the society on a psychological and emotional level. *Blasphemy* is a genuine account of Heer's trauma and domestic abuse, as well as the abuse suffered by other characters, including Kali, Guppi, Toti, Tara, Chote Sain, Sakhi Baba, Yathimri, and Cheel.

Notes:

1. The history of modern trauma studies was first recognised in 1980 when post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first contained in the therapeutic canon of the medical and psychological occupations. The Vietnam veterans who organised agitation groups against the continuation of the war were responsible for the long-term political activity that led to the formal acknowledgement of PTSD. These organisations quickly grew across the country and had two functions: they helped return soldiers by providing assistance and counselling and educating the public about the repercussions of the war.
2. Trauma research was established in the 1860s when clinicians observed the abnormal reaction of the victims of railway accidents that reached beyond their physical wounds. Nevertheless, until the 1880s that doctors started doing psychological tests on patients, primarily female patients exhibiting strange behaviour with no obvious cause. Many critics were focused on the psychological aspect of trauma. The outbreak of the First World War revived interest in trauma studies after the public's first obsession with hysterical women had subsided (Anderson 5-6).
3. It was initially considered a feature of their gender's weakened constitution, "faulty heredity exacerbated by the biological and social crisis of puberty" (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 130). She also points out that "although these views focused more on the physical aspect, they did not ignore the relevance of the specific restrictions— restricted activity and sexual repression— placed on women" (130). Women's mental illnesses were brought to light through the work of early psychoanalysts like Charcot, Breuer, and Freud, but nothing was done to represent the stigma or the root of trauma. In actuality, some attribute the persistence of misogyny towards women from Freud's theory of sexual development.

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