

## UNVEILING THE SUBVERSIVE: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF GENDER, POWER, AND RESISTANCE IN TEHMINA DURRANI'S BLASPHEMY

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### ABSTRACT

This study integrates Judith Butler's theory of performativity into a feminist analysis of Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*. The study contends that the narrative depicts female characters actively resisting patriarchal norms and expectations through gender performance. Using Butler's theory, this study examines how the novel challenges the notion of a fixed, essential identity by depicting characters forging alternate identities that reject the constraints imposed by society. The study examines how Durrani describes power as performative and fluid, as characters negotiate and dispute the power dynamics. The concept of power is depicted as dynamic, subject to negotiation and contention, offering a novel viewpoint on acts of resistance. The study illustrates that applying Butler's theory of performativity to the novel's text provides an intriguing perspective on the issues of gender, power, and resistance in Durrani's fiction. The approach contributes to more significant dialogues concerning how gender is built and performed and the possibility of resistance and subversion within performative acts. The study posits Durrani's narrative as a discerning critique of patriarchy and Islamophobia, thus contributing to conversations on intersectionality and religious identity. This study demonstrates that feminist literary criticism can benefit from applying creative and pertinent theoretical frameworks that enhance our comprehension of literature's subversive potential.

**Keywords:** Blasphemy; Tehmina Durrani; Butler; Gender; Patriarchy; Power

### INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is a nation that adheres to the Islamic faith and follows a patriarchal family structure, wherein the male assumes the role of the family head and exercises decision-making authority, thereby determining the position of the female members within the family hierarchy. The utilisation of religion as a means of male domination and female exploitation is a prevalent feature of the patriarchal social structure in Pakistan. Although religion proclaims equal rights for women, it has been observed that religious authorities have been known to abuse their power by misinterpreting religious texts. It is worth noting that Islam, for instance, has granted women property rights. Consequently, women are deprived of their entitlements. The

utilisation of religion in an inappropriate manner serves as a fundamental pillar of patriarchy, particularly in the rural regions of Pakistan.

The novel draws inspiration from a factual account wherein the misrepresentation of Islam by its ecclesiastical authorities is brought to light. Durrani's *Blasphemy* portrays the tragic fate of Heer, a woman of great physical attractiveness, who undergoes severe mistreatment and moral decay at the hands of her spouse, Pir Sain. The novel's text pertains to the challenges faced by a Muslim woman in her efforts to uphold the principles of Islam in the face of opposing forces. The text provides a disturbing narrative of how individuals responsible for overseeing religious practices utilise their

specialised knowledge to exploit others. The protagonist of the literary work is Heer, whom Pir Sain espies and subsequently elects to wed despite the significant disparity in their ages. The mother of Heer expresses great satisfaction with this union as she believes it would reinstate her family's honour. On the initial night of their matrimony, Pir Sain subjected her body to mistreatment. Subsequently, he exerts dominion over her psyche and essence, and Heer is coerced into conforming to a lifestyle that is beyond the capacity of any individual to endure. Daily, she relinquishes her physical being to Pir Sain, yet her spiritual essence persistently resists as she anticipates a moment of tranquillity to envelop her. Pir Sain, a person who engages in sexual infidelity, carries out religious obligations in the capacity of a saint. The circumference surrounding him comprises individuals who provide him with their backing. Their sole intention is to incite anger among women while taking refuge behind the veil of religion. They engage in sexual abuse of underage girls. Pir Sain is reported to have attempted to harass his own daughter sexually. He establishes Heer as his captive, who procures female servants from the household for his deity. The individual in question engages in sexual activity with the maids in the presence of Heer and even requests her assistance in facilitating their participation in his physical gratification. Subsequently, he coerces Heer into acquiescing to the sexual requests of his patrons. In addition, the individual produces visual media depicting his spouse engaging in sexual acts with other males, deriving pleasure from viewing said recordings. Pir Sain compels his offspring to enter into matrimony with a young woman who has suffered from the transgressions of his forebears. The second son is obligated to enter into matrimony with a female individual who is, in fact, his biological sibling.

The narrative primarily concerns the influence wielded by religious authorities within a community of individuals lacking formal education. Tehmina Durrani has effectively revealed the practices of Pakistani mullahs and maulvis who use dark arts and manipulate unsuspecting individuals into becoming their adherents. However, when an individual attempts to assign blame to them, they may accuse the accuser of blasphemy, thereby effectively silencing them.

The novel presents numerous detailed accounts of maulvis exerting influence over vulnerable young girls and attractive women, subjecting them to their carnal desires. When information is kept confidential, the community does not hold those religious leaders accountable for transgressions. If a victim attempts to resist by publicly exposing the transgressions, culpability is often attributed to the victim rather than the perpetrator.

The novel is grounded in a verifiable narrative that underscores the distortion of Islam by its ecclesiastical leadership. The novel depicts the harrowing narrative of Heer, a female character who experiences both physical and moral deterioration due to the actions of her partner, Pir Sain. The text portrays the obstacles a Muslim woman encounters as she endeavours to adhere to the tenets of Islam in the face of conflicting influences. The book's text elucidates how individuals occupying religious authority leverage their specialised knowledge to exploit others disconcertingly. The novel's central focus is the protagonist, Heer, who garners the attention of Pir Sain and is subsequently selected as his consort despite the notable disparity in their ages. Heer's mother expresses contentment with the matrimonial union, as she perceives it to be a means of reinstating the honour of her household. During the initial night of their matrimony, Pir Sain inflicted physical harm upon his partner's body. The text posits that the male protagonist dominates the female protagonist's cognitive and spiritual faculties.

Consequently, Heer is exposed to a lifestyle that is intolerable for any individual. The subject in question is observed to repeatedly engage in a physical act of submission towards Pir Sain while concurrently experiencing an internal conflict as their psyche resists such conduct. The individual articulates a yearning for serenity and peacefulness to prevail within them.

Despite engaging in sexual infidelity, Pir Sain performs religious duties in the capacity of a Saint. The person is encircled by a cohort of individuals who assist him, creating a circular configuration around him. The entity or collective seems to be utilising religion as a rationale for their deliberate actions of provoking offence or resentment towards women. Specific individuals exhibit a willingness to perpetrate sexual abuse against minors, particularly female children, without any apparent reluctance. As

mentioned earlier, the assertion posits that Pir Sain is accused of purportedly attempting to commit a sexual assault against his biological offspring. The agent of the sentence is organising domestic servants to attend to the needs of his deity's attendant, Heer, who is currently in servitude. The person in question participates in sexual conduct with the household servants in the presence of Heer and even solicits her assistance in satisfying his carnal urges. The person in question employs coercion tactics to induce Heer into acquiescing to the sexual demands of his clientele. The subject produces visual media depicting his partner participating in intimate acts with other individuals, and he experiences gratification from observing such content.

The present scenario entails Pir Sain exerting pressure on his son to enter into matrimony with a woman who has suffered from the consequences of his family's previous deeds. The scenario mentioned above entails the compulsory union of the second male offspring with a female individual who shares a consanguineous relationship with him as siblings.

The narrative predominantly delves into the impact exerted by religious authorities within a populace consisting of individuals who do not possess formal academic training. The literary contributions of Tehmina Durrani have brought to the forefront the practices of select religious figures in Pakistan who employ the methods of black magic and manipulation to amass a following. Under her endeavours, she has drawn attention to the deleterious effects inflicted upon blameless individuals who are entangled in such practices. The accused parties employ a strategy of attributing blasphemy to their accusers to shift responsibility and evade culpability.

The novel portrays various narratives wherein *maulvis* wield authority over naive young girls and attractive women, ultimately subjecting them to their carnal desires. The assertion posits that in cases where the transgressions of religious leaders remain undisclosed, society does not hold them accountable for their wrongdoing. When a victim endeavours to disclose malfeasance, it is frequently observed that culpability is attributed to the victim instead of the wrongdoer.

This study uses Butler's theory of gender performativity to examine the story's power relations and how societal norms and expectations affect the

protagonists' experiences as women. This research uses Heer's story as a lens to examine gender, power, and resistance, illuminating the cultural and religious constraints on women and the myriad forms of oppression they confront. This study attempts to provide a feminist interpretation of the book by analysing critical passages to shed light on the consequences of gendered power systems and the resistance techniques used by female characters.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The term patriarchy is a multifaceted concept that has been subject to various definitions. In broad terms, patriarchy refers to the exercise of male dominance over women, either through collective or individual means.

Guin (1985) argues, "Civilised Man says: I am master; everyone else is other—outside, below, beneath, subservient" (p. 161). I possess, utilise, investigate, exploit, and explore. What matters is my actions. What I desire is the purpose of matter. I am that which I am, and the remainder is women and wilderness for my use.

In a male-dominated society, women's position and place are determined by the patriarchal system itself, as Simone de Beauvoir and H. M. Parshley note in *The Second Sex* (1989), citing Poulain de la Barre: all that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for men are both judge and litigant (Beauvoir, 1989).

Society is shaped and formed by the dominant influence of masculine ideology. At times, males have exhibited a sense of satisfaction in perceiving themselves as the dominant beings in existence. The phrase 'Blessed be God that he did not make me a woman' is recited by individuals of the Jewish faith during their morning prayers. The wives express a sentiment of acquiescence as they utter the words: 'Blessed be the Lord, who fashioned me in accordance with His divine plan' (Beauvoir, 1989).

The idea that a woman's route to heaven is dependent on her submission to her spouse has become a widely accepted belief. This phenomenon has gone viral in Pakistani-Islamic society, where men as fathers, brothers and husbands have more worth than mothers, sisters and wives. As a result, women are being oppressed and suppressed in Pakistani rural areas where awareness of religion is still a question.

The uneducated women in these areas are unaware of

their rights and voices and, therefore, unthinkingly follow their Pirs' teachings at Madrasas shrines and Mullahs (Badran, 2006).

Most wives are transferred from their paternal household to their conjugal household, effectively changing ownership between possessors (Khan, 2008). Their position is reduced to unpaid labour and a childcare machine (Khan, 2008).

Durrani has revealed the situation of a married woman and provided a concise explanation of how landlords manipulate religion to serve their own interests and justify the exploitation of women. This is often achieved through the practice of polygamy or by distorting the principles of Shariah. (Hussain, 1998).

The demise of women is not always restricted to physical death, as they are subjected to immense suffering and anguish by the esteemed male members of their families daily. Throughout centuries, in societies structured around feudalism, religion has been utilised by men as a means of safeguarding their property and maintaining its inheritance within the family (Gulzar, 2016).

Durrani's "Blasphemy" unveils how malice, sex, and violence shape rural and uneducated identities. Pastoral patriarchy forces women to forsake their emotions, desires, identities, and parents (Iqbal et al., 2014). "Blasphemy" is a story about human nature's underlying darkness, exposing exploitation, suffering, atrocities, anguish, torment, upheaval, and the loss of vital humanity and empathy. It shows a world of abuse, marital violence, gender imbalance, and decaying moral and social standards. (Mubarik, 2015).

Durrani's novel convincingly supports Pakistani women's marginalisation. It underlines Muslim culture's oppressive position for women. Durrani's analysis of Heer's self-image emphasises women's involvement in Pakistan's socio-economic progress. Durrani shows Heer's identity shift and women's place in society through the Shrine's religious implications (Saleem, 2020).

The narrative underlines the oppressive nature of cultural and ceremonial paradigms, underlining women's subjugation and the need for female bonding in order to escape an oppressive patriarchal society (Kandel, 2021). It digs into the question of how confident religious leaders who have power distort Islam. It focuses light on the unequal

allocation of power and privilege between men and women (Ayoub et al., 2022).

## **METHODOLOGY**

Utilising Judith Butler's theory of gender and performativity, this qualitative study employs a textual analysis methodology to examine gender, power, and resistance in Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*. The primary data source is the novel, analysed for crucial subjects and character interactions complemented by secondary data from relevant articles and papers. This research provides a focused and scholarly analysis of the transformative elements in Durrani's depiction of gender-related themes, enhanced by Butler's theoretical paradigms.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Before the 20th century, both sex and gender were thought to be inextricably linked natural phenomena that could not be questioned. This idea came under scrutiny alongside the growth of the feminist movement, which led to the separation of gender and sexuality as distinct categories. According to Delphy (1996), we have continued to think about gender in terms of 'sex.' The former is a social creation which is defined by a natural 'sex.' sex is the 'container,' while gender is more like the 'content' of a relationship. The container is a part of nature and, therefore, always the same, although the contents can change (Delphy, 1996, p. 34).

The concept of gender is based solely on social construction and not biology. If "male" and "female" are the acceptable terms for sex, then "masculine" and "feminine" are the correct terms for gender. Gender, however, is not at all tied to 'sex.' Although he insists that a person's sexual orientation does not define their gender, he does concede that there are circumstances in which these two factors are inexorably intertwined (Stoller, 1984).

Beauvoir posits that the state of being a woman is not an inherent quality but rather a socially constructed identity acquired through socialisation. This assertion highlights the manufactured nature of gender (Beauvoir, 1974). Merleau-Ponty's perspective on gender posits that the concept of "man" is a product of historical construction rather than a naturally occurring biological species. (p. 170). In light of this reasoning, we can challenge the naturalness of the position of women as being on the

margins while the position of men remains at the centre. The two authors believe that gender is not a natural property but a result of history, society, or culture.

Butler (1990) posits that gender is a performative act consisting of repeated stylisations of the body within a rigid regulatory framework. Over time, these acts solidify to create the appearance of a natural, substantive being. If gender is a performance, then it must be based on some event that had a place before the performance, in which case we can claim that gender is a parody. On the other hand, the performances in that parody are not unique; instead, it is an “imitation without an origin” (p. 175). Gender does not exist until it can be repeatedly shown via behaviour. However, this does not imply that a person is free to carry out whatever actions they like because there is a “rigid regulatory frame” in which they are required to carry out their actions. In addition, she argues that gender does not exist independently of the different activities that give rise to the concept of gender; without these acts, gender does not exist. As a result, the creation of gender often serves to obscure its true historical roots (p. 178). Butler (1988) claims that “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (p. 520). Thus, it can be argued that gender is a non-tangible entity, existing solely as an abstract construct until it is manifested in some form. The construction of a person’s gender identity is an ongoing process that gives the appearance of being a natural phenomenon.

Since gender existed before the appearance of ‘I’ and ‘we,’ Butler (1993) contends that if gender is formed, it is not always constructed by an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ (p. 18). This is because ‘I’ and ‘we’ were not always there. An individual’s action is, to some extent, an action that has been in progress before their involvement (Butler, 1988). The performance of gender is a constructed and performative process that does not inherently confer value upon the individual enacting it. As per Butler’s assertion, the presence of a “doer behind the deed” is not mandatory, as the “doer” can be constituted “through the deed” (Butler, 1990, p. 181).

Similar to J. L. Austin’s performative utterances (1962), in which performance occurs with speech, gender performance labels a body as female. However, in the case of gender, performance takes

the shape of utterance. According to Butler (1993), this “naming of the ‘girl’ is transitive” and “initiates the process by which a certain ‘Girling’ is compelled.” According to the author, “Femininity is thus not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm” (p. 239).

“Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, and neither original nor derived” (Butler, 1990, p. 180). It should not be treated “as a stable identity” since it “is not a fact” instead. It is “constituted in time” (pp. 178-179). When gender is not a natural concept, it must be amended and changed with time. Butler is concerned with improving the many people currently in a vulnerable state. According to Butler (1988), setting gender limits can entail “punitive consequences” for individuals who do not fit in its tight framework, and this is one of the reasons why gender norms are one of the causes of precarity (522). Those individuals who do not conform to a particular gender framework are subjected to persistent discrimination based on their gender. The “arbitrary relation between [such] acts” and the breaking of gender-specific patterns of repetition are both necessary for the possibility of gender transition. (Butler, 1990, p. 179). The concept of drag, which Butler (1990) defines as “the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed,” is one method that can be used to cross the line established by gender standards. (p. 175). Newton (1972) asserts that drag “is a double inversion,” which essentially translates to “Appearance is an illusion” (p. 103). It indicates that a person’s body is masculine despite having a feminine appearance.

#### **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT**

Blasphemy is a nerve-shattering novel that exposes Pir Sain, a predatory religious leader and interpreter of Islam who can be seen as a hypocrite, tyrant, paedophile, and exploiter.

Heer, the novel’s main protagonist, is shown as a figure who is a victim of patriarchy and accused of being a woman. The patriarchal state is highly dominant all over the novel. Heer’s mother requires a man who can financially and morally help their family. She is a widow and thinks that her moral and financial position has been badly affected without her husband. She feels weak and insists Heer get

wed-locked with Pir Sain by blackmailing her emotionally. She is sure that Pir Sain, the noblest, richest and most powerful, can care for their poor souls.

“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 job. Our status will improve tremendously. I even like his name. It sounds very powerful” (Durrani, 1998, p. 25).

Power dynamics play a significant role in the community, as the speaker strongly advocates for the protagonist's marriage to elevate their family's reputation and social standing. Marriage's association with economic and social mobility is detrimental to society as it perpetuates gender stereotypes and imposes unrealistic expectations on individuals, especially women. The patriarchal nature of the society depicted is reinforced by the speaker's admiration for the groom's powerful-sounding name. It is crucial to acknowledge that this excerpt has the potential to challenge existing power structures. By portraying the protagonist's agency in navigating her role within a patriarchal system, the excerpt highlights the possibilities for resistance and subversion. The protagonist's assertion of her desires and autonomy within societal expectations is a powerful tool for challenging the status quo. Therefore, it is essential to recognise the significance of this excerpt in promoting a more equitable and just society.

Some cultural parameters also reflect patriarchy as in the novel, Heer's mother describes the importance of dowry and relates it to the belongings of her 'father': "Heer's worth will be based on her dowry" (Durrani, 1998, p. 27).

The statement suggests a widely held belief that a woman's worth is determined by how many material possessions she brings as a dowry from her father's home to her new marital household. The viewpoint expressed highlights how society places great importance on the financial aspect of marriage, valuing a woman based on the monetary value she brings to the union rather than her personal qualities or skills. The excerpt highlights the objectification of women in this context by equating respect with the dowry, thereby reducing their worth to the monetary value of their dowry. The statement highlights the

perpetuation of gender inequality and emphasises the need to analyse how societal norms and expectations influence the perception of women's value and respect.

Heer has no own voice and no freedom at all since she belongs to a patriarchal society:

“I tried to like his solemnity for I knew I had to like him for something” (Durrani, 1998, p. 28).

This reveals a feeling of duty or external influence to accept and appreciate this individual. The text suggests that the protagonist may feel pressure to adhere to specific societal or familial expectations regarding her behaviour and relationships. The internal conflict highlights the intricate process of managing individual choices and actions while sticking to societal norms and standards. The text encourages a more in-depth examination of the main character's ability to navigate power imbalances, societal expectations of gender, and the degree to which she pushes back against established conventions in her pursuit of independence and self-realisation.

Women's voices have always been oppressed in a patriarchal society, so they lost their identity. Heer, who is also a victim of an identity crisis, sees herself as incomplete without her husband's identity:

“I would become mistress of my own home and carry a husband's name.” (Durrani, 1998, p. 31)

Heer's matrimonial choice can be interpreted as asserting her autonomy and cultivating her identity. The statement posits that the individual seeks to establish their independence within the institution of marriage by assuming the role of the head of the household and adopting their spouse's surname. The author highlights the idea of taking charge of one's household to establish power and dominance within the domestic realm. Using a husband's name could indicate a desire for a sense of identity and recognition through marriage. This may be an attempt to challenge or reshape societal norms regarding gender roles and power dynamics. The excerpt suggests that the main character desires to control her life and pursue her goals despite living in a male-dominated society. This raises questions about her journey and whether she can achieve independence and empowerment.

Heer has been exploited physically and emotionally several times, even during her marriage, when she notices that Pir Sain did not wear their clothes. She

gets emotionally hurt and asks her brother about this refusal of Sain, and then she gets the answer:

“You know he does what he likes and gives no explanation” (Durrani, 1998, p. 34).

It implies a power imbalance in which a particular character can make decisions independently without facing any consequences from others. The individual appears to prioritise their desires and does not feel obligated to justify or explain their behaviour. It also suggests that power imbalances may exist in relationships, implying that one person may have more power or privilege than another. This could result in the individual with more power being able to act without being held accountable. It prompts an inquiry into the consequences of power dynamics on individuals, specifically regarding their agency, control, and capacity to challenge or question the actions of those in power positions by emphasising a particular character's behaviour.

After Heer gets married, she realises that fate has already planned something evil for her and that her life is a curse. On the very first night of her wedding, every pure corner of her soul is mutilated by Pir Sain, and she understands that she has been sold in the name of a signed contract, what people call a marriage license:

“I had been sacrificed to a god on earth.” (Durrani, 1998, p. 39)

Heer feels she has been presented as an offering to a terrestrial god. The sacrifice mentioned in the text is metaphorical, suggesting that the protagonist is powerless and subordinated. This implies that the protagonist's ability to act independently and make decisions has been taken away or ignored. The passage employs sacrificial imagery to emphasise the oppressive conditions that the protagonist is facing, potentially in the context of a coerced or predetermined marriage. The text touches upon themes related to the exercise of patriarchal power, the influence of societal norms, and the enforcement of conventional gender roles.

The patriarchal voice echoes again, which lets Heer assume that she is always dependent on men and does not have her place:

“When a woman becomes a widow, her son inherits her husband's position” (Durrani, 1998, p. 45).

A woman's social standing is determined by the presence or absence of a man in her life, regardless of her financial or societal achievements. It

highlights the persistent patriarchal system that dictates the lives of women in the society being depicted. The passage discusses women's restricted level of control and independence due to their societal status, dependent on their connections with men. The main character demonstrates an awareness of her current position in the cycle, highlighting her understanding of the societal norms and limitations placed upon her. The passage encourages an examination of gender inequality, the continuation of conventional gender norms, and the limitations placed on women's self-sufficiency and freedom in the portrayed societal framework.

Pir Sain exploits Heer badly; even physical torture is his favourite method to convince her he is the authority there. He brutally beats Heer, and when she asks Amma Sain to call her mother to see her, she is shocked to hear:

“Your husband will decide when to let her come” (Durrani, 1998, p. 48).

Heer is not even allowed to meet her mother, and until the next orders come from Pir Sain, she cannot go either. Pir Sain's male voice rules over the courtyard and depresses fifteen-year-old Heer, who once enlightened her eyes with twinkling dreams. Heer's inner voice enumerates her pain and emptiness:

“Was this hell? Was he encountered by God to lift me from a dirty alley, raise me to supremacy and reduce me to an insect? Was he god? Unpredictable and unaccountable?” (Durrani, 1998, p. 48).

She is experiencing inner turmoil as they struggle to reconcile their conflicting emotions and thoughts. She questions whether her present circumstances are a form of torment or punishment. She is reflecting on the possibility that the man in their life, who initially seemed to provide relief from a challenging situation, may have ultimately imposed a distinct form of subjugation.

She feels inferior, lonely and broken:

“Even the maids were luckier than me, for they could go home. The five female cats, that looked as imprisoned as me were also luckier for they were able to slink away from Pir Sain's path and disappear like I never could.” (Durrani, 1998, p. 49)

She contrasts her situation with the maids, who have the privilege of returning home, emphasising her lack of freedom and desire to flee. In addition, she determines her concern with the female cats, who,

despite their confinement, can elude the oppressive presence of Pir Sain and vanish without consequence. This passage emphasises the protagonist's profound yearning for liberation and the limitations imposed on her by patriarchal structures and the power dynamics in her environment.

Pir Sain continuously enjoys torturing Heer emotionally:

“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, 1998, p. 58).

Women at the shrine and the courtyard have no real identity. They were becoming faceless, hideous and miserable creatures without worth and respect. Everything begins and ends under the supreme legacy of Pir Sain, who is thought to be the assistant of God. Pir Sain violates all Islamic values and makes his legacy with dynamic politico-religious supremacy. The followers, with their ignorant eyes, never dared to look at the satanic face of the Sain.

“There were so many others like us. As a member of the similar shrine, I wondered what was happening to their women. Faceless and nameless, they must all be trapped like me. Pir Sain ruled over his trapped people. He could demand and extract anything from anyone. Considered to be a direct link between the Almighty and the wretched, people believed that his intervention could even alter what Allah had fated for them. That made them worship him” (Durrani, 1998, p. 61).

As a constituent of a comparable shrine, she reflects upon the destiny of other women, acknowledging their mutual encounter of being confined and relegated to a lower social status. The passage underscores the complete dominion of Pir Sain, who employs manipulation and exploitation tactics on his adherents, coercing them into fulfilling his every whim and desire. The conviction in his divine affiliation and capacity to manipulate fate strengthens his dominion over the populace, inducing veneration among his followers.

In the name of the divine and Islam, people are asked to donate their clams to the holy shrine for numerous blessings. Those who cannot afford the cash offer themselves for the conciliation of their Pir Sain as his position on earth is as the second God. People bow before him and beg to bless them with his divine

providence. Thus, Pir Sain misleads and misguides his gullible ‘mureeds’, and they learn a new version of Islam that has nothing to do with honest Islam.

“I wondered if it were really possible to gain Allah’s attention through little scribbles. Unanswered prayers were forgotten, answered ones were called miracles” (Durrani, 1998, p. 65).

Durrani’s Blasphemy exposes the violation of Islamic teachings and the degrading of humans and humanity. Kaali’s character depicts her misery and brutal encounter in a patriarchal society where religion is considered dominant and inevitable. Islam has introduced ethics and moral values like chastity and modesty, but the practice of Islam has been reduced to personal gains only. Heer and Kaali can be seen as the victim of their husbands who demoralise every living moment, leaving behind Islamic values and commandments.

“He roared, ‘Whose child was Kaali carrying?’ The fear that he might even suspect the child to be mine made me blurt out, ‘Her father-in-laws’s sain. Her husband married for his old father’s pleasure, sain.” (Durrani, 1998, p. 70)

The power dynamics based on gender and self-preservation strategies are interrelated and affect individuals in situations with limited options.

Allah, Allah’s Islam and Pir Sain’s portrayal of Islam are entirely contradictory. ‘Heer’ is puzzled about whom to follow or not. Abortion of a baby without any severe concern and caution is highly prohibited in Islam. Heer narrates how her master’s guilt became her sin.

“Pleasing and appeasing our master and God at the same time was impossible. Here God and master fused together in him. Straight after the month of fasting was over, I was pregnant and informed him. ‘Abort the child,’ he barked” (Durrani, 1998, p. 83).

Labelling the Prophet’s and Islam’s names helped the shrine become a leading position and gain social and political power. Then, Pirs started being called the descendants of the Prophet and empowered their shrines. Their traits were not concerned with the message of Islam and the Prophet’s family.

“Do their actions in any way reflect our Prophet’s greatness? Do they, in fact, not resemble the Prophet’s bitterest enemies? They are imposters, 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” (Durrani, 1998, p. 88).

Heer perceives that religion strengthens and supports Pir Sain’s political position. Islam was the signature of authorisation for Pir Sain’s illegal and immoral affairs. The so-called flag bearers of Shrine and Islam collectively planned and proposed their ideas to get more power and fame. They led their people to a path that held their free will and the power to decide for their religious stance and themselves.

“Religious leaders from across the country had assembled to discuss which injunctions of Islam best suited their interest... Middlemen and salesmen had converted Muslims into grave worshippers. This led us back to the time of jahalia, to the conditions our Prophet freed us from, and to the very reasons that had called for Islam... Heirs were attached to old men’s corpses like blood sucking leeches and another bead was strung into the tasbi that bled from the bloody business (Durrani, 1998, p. 103).

Pir Sain had announced it prohibited reading the Urdu translation of the Quran all over and outside the courtyard because the translation would expose that Pir Sain’s Islam was fake. When Guppi, Heer’s daughter, asks Amma Sain to read the Urdu translation along with Arabic (the Quran’s original language), she is answered:

“It is unnecessary. Only the original words are divine. Only they will give you sawab” (Durrani, 1998, p. 104).

Guppi’s senses awaken, curiosity overwhelms her, and she cannot stop asking:

“Did Allah reveal the Holy Book for us to gain sawab for reading? Was His aim not to instruct us? To give us direction? To tell us what to be? I think Allah expects to be taken seriously.” (Durrani, 1998, p. 104)

On the other side, Heer herself practices those acts prohibited in Islam. Pir Sain’s overgrowing lust turns him towards his daughter, Guppi. Heer wants to secure her daughters from the lustful hands of their father. She calls an orphan girl “Yathimri” and presents her to Pir Sain, an alternative to Guppi. Then, she comes up with Widow’s preteen daughters and gives them to Pir Sain for his horseplay. She embraces the evil and appeases herself, thinking:

“Child rape was a lesser evil than incest” (Durrani, 1998, p.112).

This implies a distorted moral hierarchy in which child rape is considered a lesser sin than incest. This

disquieting perspective sheds light on the prevalence of harmful and oppressive attitudes towards sexual abuse victims in certain societies. It raises critical questions regarding power dynamics, victim-blaming, and the complexities of sexual violence discussions.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex interplay between gender and religion, revealing female characters' challenges as they confront patriarchal subjugation and exploitation often cloaked in religious rationales. The novel challenges the societal and religious expectations imposed on women through the character of Heer, who serves as the primary protagonist. It sheds light on the complex interplay between religious ideologies and customs perpetuating discrimination, fear, and hostility towards women. The narrative exhibits a complex interweaving of violent acts, instances of abuse, and societal upheaval, which reflects the broader national trauma that pervades the experiences of female characters and society. Durrani adeptly utilises Heer’s encounters to bring to light the misconceptions surrounding religion, the resulting deterioration of affective bonds, and the decline in women’s participation in society.

The study makes a noteworthy contribution to the ongoing scholarly discourse by exploring a novel facet of gender performativity, resistance, and agency in Pakistani society, as illustrated in Durrani’s “Blasphemy.” This study utilises Butler’s framework of gender performativity to offer novel perspectives on how women navigate and resist cultural conventions and anticipations. This underscores the significance of engaging in a rigorous examination and enquiry into the interplay between gender and religion, particularly in situations where religious convictions are exploited to rationalise the subjugation of women. The novel’s analysis of these themes and its depiction of the challenges faced by women provide significant viewpoints for literary analysis and gender research, broadening the academic discourse and enhancing our comprehension of the intricacies of gender relations and power hierarchies.

Conclusively, “Blasphemy” is a captivating piece of literature that addresses the inequities experienced by women in a religious and male-dominated system.

Tehmina Durrani's work prompts readers to critically examine the societal constructs that sustain oppression and impede the emancipation of women. By delving into the themes of gender, power, resistance, and agency, Durrani encourages a thoughtful reflection on the prevailing norms and practices perpetuating these issues. This research highlights the importance of literature in tackling pertinent societal concerns, facilitating discourse, and championing transformative social action. This study aspires to stimulate additional examination and address the topics presented in the literary work, cultivating a more comprehensive and just society where parity between genders and women's rights is maintained.

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