CHAPTER IV
During the last few centuries women writers have considerably widened and deepened the areas of human experience with their sharp, feminine perception of life successfully transmuted into verbal artifact. The basic teaching imparted to every woman in a patriarchal society is to remain a silent spectator, even as a victim to any injustice meted out by the man and to be very careful of not going public with any personal crisis which may affect the “honour” of her man. However, women’s autobiographies cannot take it anymore. They are urging their readers and other socio-culturally repressed sisters to rediscover their marginal self and thereby gain emancipation and empowerment. The changing images of women, from the suffering women to the assertive ones, redefining self and defying traditional mores, are beautifully documented in Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord*.

In her Preface to *Post-Colonial Women Writers* (2008), Sunita Sinha rightly points out:

Tehmina Durrani’s writing... represents a distinctive and original contribution to all the oppressed voiceless classes of women around the world and provides an extraordinary insight into the vulnerable position of women caught in the complex web of patriarchal society, establishing new directions for the women’s movement in South Asia.... Tehmina Durrani builds a strong case for indictment against marriage, Vedic diktats, and social mores for women, lusty Piris and holy men, the essence of all they want to speak is not much different to what Jonathan Swift has said: “We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.” (xvi)

A member of one of the most influential Pakistani’s families, Tehmina Durrani deals with the way women are treated in Pakistan in *My Feudal Lord*. She describes her traumatic marital life with Gulam Mustafa Khar, an important politician in the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Government, who later became the Chief Minister of Punjab. Professionally a charismatic champion of democracy, on the personal front he was an inveterate wife abuser.
*My Feudal Lord* won the Italian Marrissa Bellasario prize and was later translated into several languages. The book is a means of exposing the hypocrisy of the famous and ruling Pakistani politician Gulam Mustafa Khar who was also known as the ‘Lion-of-Punjab’. *My Feudal Lord* is divided into three parts along with an Epilogue. The book spreads across 382 pages as follows:

**Part One** - Lion of The Punjab [15-118 pages]

**Part Two** - Law of The Jungle [119-254 pages]

**Part Three** - Lioness [255-375 pages]

**Epilogue** - [377-382 pages]

Throughout the three parts one can map the progress of Tehmina from an ordinary elitist housewife to an emancipated human being contesting for equal rights and women's empowerment.

In Pakistani society, where the Muslim patriarchs dominate, the entity of a woman is that of an inferior being, both intellectually and socially. Her existence is held to be an instrument for the satisfaction of the man’s sexual desires and perpetuation of the species. Curiously enough, most of the women had willingly accepted this status and strove to do justice to it. Tehmina writes:

> The women in our circle did not seem to look beyond their raised noses. They chattered endlessly about disobedient servants, clothes, jewellery and interior decorations... Many a day in the lives of these women was completely devoted to the topic of what to wear that evening. (65)

Tehmina herself was no exception to this rule and fashioned herself mechanically to cater to her husband’s preference to be it in appearance, attire or makeup. Moreover she reveled in the conventional social expectations of the behavior expected of a married woman.

The first part of *My Feudal Lord* portrays Mustafa as a man who believes in the total subjugation, repression and oppression of his female counterpart. Tehmina’s conventional upbringing conditioned by her patriarchal social environment, in which she lived, made her accept her husband Mustafa’s physical assaults and sexual brutality as a part her destiny. That was the social ethos which inculcated itself into her being. Her mother’s comment aptly illustrates this: “If a husband behaves in a strange or
unreasonable manner, you should treat him like a sick human being, like someone who needs medical care and treatment. Deal with him like a psychiatrist.” (130)

But Mustafa is neither sick nor unreasonable. He is irrationally possessive in a manner reminiscent of the Duke of Ferrara in Browning’s *My Last Duchess*. According to Mustafa, a woman, like land, is “power, prestige and a property” – a commodity meant for utilization and consumption in whichever way the owner/master deems fit. Surprisingly, when Tehmina becomes pregnant as a result of Mustafa’s violent rapist tortures, he takes a lot of personal care of her. However, a close reading of the autobiography makes the reader realize that it is not out of love for her but in the hope of a male heir that Mustafa is attending to Tehmina. Her endurance of his tortures is the result of an archaic patriarchal value which inculcates a sense of slavery into the essence of womanhood.

This extends to sexual domination of the wife by the husband. Patriarchal discourse does not regard sex as a means of mutual physical enjoyment but rather as a tool of domination. This is why Tehmina tries to perpetuate her marriage bond with Mustafa, realizing fully well that in her society, a divorced woman is the most despicable of the human species. While commenting on her loveless marriage, Tehmina bewails:

> There was not a day that Mustafa did not hit me... I just tried my best not to provoke him... I was afraid that my slightest response to his advances would reinforce his image of me as a common slut. This was a feudal hang-up: his class believed that a woman was an instrument of a man’s carnal pleasure. If the woman ever indicated that she felt pleasure, she was a potential adulteress, not to be trusted. Mustafa did not even realize that he had crushed my sensuality. I was on automatic pilot...responding as much as was important for him but never feeling anything myself. If he was satisfied there was a chance that he would be in better humour. It was at these times that I realized that prostitution must be a most difficult profession. (106)

The second part of the book is set in a politically turbulent atmosphere of General Zia’s coup, overthrowing the Prime Minister Zulfiquar Ali Bhutto and establishing a military regime. Mustafa, a Bhutto loyalist, now falls from grace of the new regime and along with Tehmina, goes to London via Mecca. Before leaving his country, Mustafa promises to the government led by General Zia that he will bring back some important documents from London and these will be of immense help to Pakistan. Yet, once Mustafa reaches London, his dilemma is resolved and he decides to remain
loyal to the Bhutto Government and so he starts contacting all possible exiles there. In London he stays in an apartment owned by Tehmina's parents who want their daughter and son-in-law to live happily together. They also urge the two not to file for divorce. Her father tells her: "You can only leave his home in a coffin." (126) Emboldened by his father-in-law's approval and attitude, Mustafa starts behaving as before, and to make matters worse, he begins seducing Tehmina's younger sister Adila, while physically assaulting Tehmina regularly. Overcome by his physical assaults, she finally raises her voice telling him: "This is my father's house and I do not think that you should dare to lift a hand on me here." (134) However, her protest becomes feeble once she realizes that her family will not support her at all and she can hardly have to receive support from anyone else. Left with no material and mental support and with the hope of a bleak future before her, she reconciles yet again with her brutal husband. Her only consolation is in the power of the Almighty to whom she prays constantly to alleviate her sufferings and to make her husband realize his shortcomings.

The last blow comes after she becomes pregnant again and unforeseen circumstances compel her to visit a male doctor. This hits Mustafa's ego and he sees her visit to a male doctor as an unforgivable transgression whereby she has insulted his manhood and his right over her as her husband. He beats the pregnant Tehmina brutally. This is an insight into the sexual ego of the feudal master who treats his wife as a possession. For the first time in her life she thinks seriously of divorce but realizes that she might have to forgo her right over her daughter. So she once again reconciles with her destiny: "A prisoner ultimately settles into a monotonous routine. Anger recedes, senses dull. The spirit is crushed." (143)

Politics in Pakistan begins changing with execution of Bhutto in 1979. Mustafa senses the futility and feels that the revolutionary group aiming at overthrowing the Zia Govt. will instead strengthen Zia and give him an excuse to eliminate all the supporters of Bhutto who were still in Pakistan. So Mustafa changes his potential strategy. He starts travelling the entire continent, mobilizing support from those in exile, tirelessly delivering lectures at public meetings for a sensible change in the govt. of Pakistan. At this stage of his life and career he appears to be a champion of democracy in public life, although he is an inveterate wife-abuser in his private life. His words enthuse Tehmina and she starts believing that soon her country shall be free from the clutches of martial law imposed by the military govt.

(135)
In the meantime Mustafa develops extramarital relationship with Adila, his sister-in-law, which is subsequently discovered by Tehmina. Yet she blames her sister for this and complains about the affair to her mother. This is her desperate attempt to protect her husband's honour in her parent's house. But the result of this is disastrous. He batters her with the butt of double-barrel shotgun and strips her nude, taking away from her even the last vestige of security. This episode has oppressive effect on her soul. As she recollects, it "crippled my spirit perhaps beyond salvation. From this moment forward it would be nearly impossible for me to function as an individual. There was not one iota of self-esteem left. The shame had burned it down to ashes."

In a heroic way, she retorts in fury when he next tries to hit her: "The next time you raise your hand on me. I will pick-up a knife and kill you." Despite this, Tehmina remains with her husband and visits India on a diplomatic mission. After the meeting, she visits the Holy Shrine of Ajmer and her prayer reveals her deep devoutness and reverence for her religion:

My two shadows were at my side as I entered the shrine. Their Hindu presence disturbed my Islamic prayers....... I asked God to curb Mustafa's bouts of violence and insanity. I want a normal home with peace and harmony. I prayed that God would give Mustafa respect and end in exile. (233-34)

After their return from India, Mustafa and Tehmina file a case for separation under the court of law in England. This is granted and after the legal separation, she decides to cut her hair thereby sending a message to Mustafa that she will never return to him, as he had been besotted with her beautiful hair and the act of cutting them is symbolic of her cutting him of her existence. She writes: "He knew that I had finally decided not to return to him ever again. Otherwise I would not have done away with what he loved most about me. Without my hair he was a weak Samson." (236)

But his male ego is affronted and he begins wooing her back with a vengeance. Eventually he succeeds in winning her over by enthusing her with his noble mission of returning home to rescue his country from the clutches of its martial government. A kind of ideological affection makes the two of them return together to Pakistan upon which he is immediately arrested at the airport. Tehmina, being his wife, receives much public attention and is for the first time accepted as a leader of the people. Being a dutiful wife, legal separation withstanding, she visits the jailed Mustafa regularly and tries to mobilize public support for him. He has no alternative except her and so he
controls his temper. Eventually his perversions dominate her and his lust for her resurfaces making him rape her in jail on his birthday. She is physically ravaged by the wounds he inflicts as she is still recovering from surgery. This is the final blow and she applies for the Islamic “Khula” or divorce granted to a woman as long as she relinquishes all her claims to property. He tries to prevent the termination of the marriage because she is the sole means of his release from jail. So he successfully brainwashes her into dreaming an ideal society and envisioning him as the champion of democracy. She relentlessly and successfully campaigns his release.

When Mustafa emerges from jail his real self is revealed – he is not the champion of the downtrodden but the same selfish, jealous, egoistic and possessive man. Surprised at the public image and support built by Tehmina around herself, he raves with jealousy and does not acknowledge all her efforts in his release from jail. On the domestic front, he resumes his illicit relationship with his sister-in-law Adila. Tehmina, however, is no longer docile, compromising, submissive and tolerant. She curtly tells him in the presence of all: “Your marriage according to the Koran was over years ago when you slept with my sister, I have been living with you in sin. The contract stood null and void long ago.” (362)

Tehmina now decides to complete the divorce proceedings and also begins to write an autobiography. She believes that ethical compulsions demand this act of courage and she owes it to her closed and repressive society to reveal the deepest personal secrets of her life. The New emancipated Tehmina has a courage born out of enduring oppression, and believes that “Silence condones injustice, breeds subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy. Mustafa Khar and other feudal lords thrive and multiply on silence. Muslim women must learn to raise their voice against injustice.” (375)

Tehmina Durrani goes carefully unwinding the details of her private life in a male-dominated chauvinistic society, to give voice to the abuse she suffered while being married to a despotic and brutish husband Mustafa Khar as a Sixth Wife. After being suffered in silence for 13 years, often trading her self-esteem and facing physical abuse as well as emotional blackmail, Tehmina Durrani stands up for what she truly is. She broke free from the convention and took up the choice of raising her voice against her conniving, manipulative, and spineless Feudal Lordship, risking her life and character assassination in public for her conscience. She always went back to her
husband even after going through all those violent abuses, sometimes nearing her to death. She reasons that this was because a female divorce in the Muslim society was treated with no respect and her life would have been made hell. But still, would someone go through so much, just because of the societal pressure? Writing the book would have been a difficult task for her to have exposed all those big names in the political domain and the finer details of her personal life. The reading of the book might put one into a lot of introspection and trigger some ‘deep thinking’ about various aspects of life — especially about personal relationships.

In private, however, the story-book romance of the most talked-about couple in Pakistan rapidly turned sour. Mustafa Khar became violently possessive and pathologically jealous, and succeeded in cutting his wife off from the outside world. For the course of the fourteen-year marriage, she suffered alone, in silence. When Tehmina decided to rebel, the price she paid was extremely high: as a Muslim woman seeking a divorce, she signed away all financial support, lost the custody of her four children, and found herself alienated from her friends and disowned by her parents.

Patriarchal discourse limits and transcribes the image and identity of Tehmina but she inverts the social and familial constraints to emerge as a new woman. She strives against all odds to escape all forms of essential categorizing that render the subaltern or minority woman both the victim and the unwilling perpetrator of damning stereotypical metaphor both by Eurocentric imperialism and the patriarchal tenets of her Islamic society, the power politics in Pakistani Govt. and the social ethos of Pakistani marital life. Tehmina is urging her readers and other socio-culturally repressed sisters to rediscover their marginal self and thereby gain emancipation and empowerment.

Tehmina Durrani depicts both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. Her autobiography furnishes examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition; it offers an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of the patriarchal social organization. It is significant in making society aware of women’s demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression. It deals with Tehmina Durrani’s own life and status within the Pakistani society in terms of her own role in her marriage as a feudal elite wife, and then as a role model protesting her maltreatment in the Pakistani feudal patriarchal system. She exposes it to the full revealing its ugly side.
that treats women as possessions and symbols of honour. This makes her the first and only woman writer in Pakistan to have done so through autobiography to date.

Pakistan’s history after independence from the British colonizers in August, 1947 has been a checkered one in which its society has steered a political course from a liberal, progressive one to a fundamentalist, religious extremist identity internationally. Although formed distinctly as a state for Muslims, Pakistan’s early founders and politicians of the time prized a secular and democratic society. The clergy, however, continued to demand a share in the political arena, pressing for a conservative religion-based code of conduct for women in particular. The clergy and the political elite clashed over the country’s identity as an orthodox religious state, and the early political elite’s emphasis in the new state was on “Islamic principles and not Islamic law” (7) which would seriously clash with the foundation of a secular society that they favoured. Initially, though little in number, women were encouraged to participate in various fields without the fear of social stigmatization. Religion and the State did not dictate their lives, but rather culture, family and religious values, combined at the personal or family level, constituted the moral and social code of behavior and conduct for women. South Asia historian Ayesha Jalal explains: “Although women were apparently welcomed into the public domain as participants in the Pakistan movement, most of them did so not as autonomous actors but as appendages of their men”. (84) However, gradually, as the new state matured and found its niche in the Muslim world, so did its women, who ventured out in the field of politics, medicine, engineering, law, etc., besides the arts, including filmmaking, music and literature.

Although the Islamization process initiated after the military coup by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1977 changed the social and political conditions of the country enormously through the implementation of orthodox Islamic Sharia laws, the women’s movement gained momentum in every sphere, including the arts, theatre and literature, as a measure of their resistance and refusal to succumb to discriminatory state policies regarding women. New women’s organizations sprung up (1987:71) with offices in major cities of the country, to initiate awareness campaigns and to mobilize women to resist and protest the politically motivated and specifically gender-discriminatory legislation in the guise of religion, which are still intact although pressure from women’s rights groups, as well as international rights groups that monitor human rights violations in the third world, has been mounting on successive governments to repeal
these laws. (Ibid: 99) This struggle for equality and justice also led to a notable increase in women’s writings and other artistic contributions around the issues of gender-discrimination and religious orthodoxy, particularly through poetry and theatre.

Today, the contemporary Pakistani society has evolved into one of many contradictions. On the one hand, there is a struggle to enforce an Islamic culture as a means of thwarting Western influences of modernization and liberation which are seen by the religious orthodoxy as a threat to Muslim identity, particularly in terms of the emancipation of women. On the other hand, the majority of the urban, educated classes and many in the ruling elite of the country favour a liberal and secular society, much as it used to be before the Islamization process of the late 1970s. In particular, urban, educated women in Pakistan, as in Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco have been at the forefront of leading the struggle for women’s emancipation, equal opportunities, and the repeal of gender-discriminatory laws. They seek equality in every sphere of operation regardless the socio-religious segregation and restrictions placed upon them through Islamic fundamentalist interpretations of the Islamic holy text, the Quran. On possibilities for Muslim women’s emancipation, Pakistani theologian, Riffat Hassan points out:

No matter how many sociopolitical rights are granted to women, as long as these women are conditioned to accept the myths used by theologians or religious hierarchies to shackle their bodies, hearts, minds, and souls, they will never become fully developed or whole human beings, free of fear and guilt, able to stand equal to men in the sight of God. (43)

Thus, Muslim women, because of their shared heritage of religious and patriarchal oppression, have forged a cross-cultural alliance in their respective domains as activists, academics and writers to press for justice and equality. For example, the shared memories and experiences of patriarchal abuse and feminist objectives and demands of emancipation and equality find a unifying voice within literature written by Muslim women. For them, it is easy to identify with the other whether its roots are in Pakistan society or the Arab world.

The literary scene in post-independence Pakistan had traditionally been dominated by male Urdu writers, poets, short story writers, dramatists and essayists. This was largely so because the literary tradition among the Muslims in the Indian sub-continent did not allow women’s voices to be heard in public. Culturally, women were not in a position to find recognition as individuals due to the spatial segregation of the
sexes. The most popular form of literature in Urdu has been poetry, with a tradition of public recitations, known as the mushaira, supplying the forum for poets to compete with each other by reciting their latest works. Women could not participate in this exercise due to social and cultural segregation. However, some educated Urdu speaking women did break the norm by writing short stories and books on the theme of the partition from India in 1947. The significant turning point in Pakistan’s literature and arts has its roots in the imposition of the Islamic Sharia laws implemented by the military dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq in 1979 after deposing the democratically-elected government of Z.A. Bhutto. As the country’s Islamic but progressive society faced a shocking, forced regression through the implementation of authoritarianism and gender-discriminatory laws, its writers, artists and academics emerged as the most vocal voices of resistance and inspiration, urging youth to reject the regime’s religious fundamentalism and to fight for democracy and progressive ideals that would not demean women as lesser citizens. Poets, artists, playwrights, actors, prose writers, newspaper columnists, academics, and women activists spread awareness against oppression and mobilized people throughout the eleven years of the martial law regime. For example, several female newscasters on the state-run television resigned in protest against the state decree for all females working in government offices and organizations to cover their heads as a measure of the Islamic tradition. Inderpal Grewal comments on the political and social environment in Pakistan during that period:

It is not only within a distortion of the role of women but also through various marginalizing practices that General Zia-ul-Haq brought in his Islamization programme. A move to Quranic laws, supported by a fundamentalist party called the Jammat-e-Islami, turned out to be mostly anti-women. The Jammat-e-Islami in 1983 was pushing the government to ban women from government jobs, the arts, the media, and even from driving cars, and to create separate women's universities. The Majlis-e-Shoora, the Federal Council, included members such as Dr. Israr Ahmed, who proposed “chadar and chardivari” (Purdah [segregation] and four walls) for women, saying that women should be confined to their homes and exist just for the pleasure of the male. The Majlis-e-Shoora was also responsible for the official “Should women Vote?” questionnaire distributed in 1985. (24-42)

The dictatorship launched a massive crackdown on progressive individuals who resisted religious fundamentalism by sacking them from their jobs, implicating them in false court cases, harassment, imprisonment, torture, or forcing them into exile.
Despite the military government’s policies, a distinctly feminist literature emerged in the 1980s, with women poets protesting gender discrimination and oppressive laws and practices, such as the imposition of Islamic injunctions that specified a lower social and gender status for women. This was a new development in the country’s literary culture, and one that was wholeheartedly supported by the progressive male elements in the literary world. These women writers broke conventional expectations of female writers, braving conventional opposition within the literary community as well as their society. Writer and literary critic Rukhsana Ahmad elaborates on the dominant patriarchal climate:

…the literary establishment always implies that women poets are a special case: they achieve publication and, sometimes, celebrity, because they are women rather than because they are poets… They are easily marginalized by the implication that the interest in the work derives from its rarity rather than any intrinsic qualities the work itself might possess. The source of the prejudice in both cases is exactly the same: the conservation of literary establishments and their stranglehold on aesthetic values, their tendency to dismiss work to which they cannot themselves relate and their inability to empathize with work that derives directly from women’s experiences.” (1)

In view of the above observation, the emergence of feminist literary voices in Pakistan from within what used to be a predominantly male domain served as notable progress towards a feminist literary milieu that questioned the status quo through the genre of literature as an act of feminist activism. The new breed of feminist poets that rose to prominence in the environment of state-ordained Islamization went a step further as they veered away from the conventional form of the elitist ghazal. Women poets like Kishwar Naheed and Fehmida Riaz were at the forefront of writers who were harassed persistently during the martial law years because of their very vocal resistance to religion-based gender oppression through discrimination laws. They used autobiographical details of gender-oppression to illustrate their case, and struck a chord with other women not only in their own country, but, through the translations of their works, with women across cultures who could relate to similar oppressions. A reading of these and other feminist Pakistani writers depicts the non-passive attitudes of a great number of urban, educated Pakistani women who joined the struggle for liberation and
a return to democratic rule in the country through various means. It is significant to note that in opposition to the Islamization process, the women's movement in Pakistan emerged as a strong political and social entity at several levels as opposed to the earlier women's organizations that mostly worked in women's social welfare spheres. Consequently, organizations such as Women's Action Forum, which mainly comprised writers and academics, came into existence and concentrated mainly on opposing gender-discriminatory Islamic laws as their agenda for change and reform. In their bid to reclaim their identities as women and individuals in their own right, Pakistani feminist poets and activists rejected the imposition of the chador and seclusion within four walls as symbols of patriarchal male honour and tradition that being extended by the Islamists to symbolize national honour and pride through the marginalization of women through a direct curtailment of their physical activity and social spheres.

Tehmina Durrani, through her very decision to write her autobiography, played a unique role in the Pakistani context, and furthered the feminist struggle against patriarchal oppression and domination by pioneering to reveal through lived experience of abuse and surviving to tell it. Although her detractors in Pakistani elite circles have accused her of immodesty, sensationalism and opportunism, Durrani, as a Muslim woman in the Pakistani context, has the distinction of telling her story without omitting details of her own extra-marital affair with the man she would later marry and write about as her 'feudal lord', besides the emotional and physical torture she endured to make the writing of it an option and reality.

It is the retrospective characteristic of autobiography that brings with a host of possibilities, particularly for the marginalized and oppressed ordinary women's voices that find their way into feminist writings, as in Durrani's case. The motives behind why a woman writer decides to tell her particular life story, or a part of it, and put it on record may vary. The reasons for such an exercise can range from anger, fear, remorse, guilt and explanation, apology, confession, redemption or self-praise etc. Communicating in the first person, the writer finds the freedom to explore and share that private space of the mind and heart that has compelled and empowered her to share her life in the first place. Looking back through the lens of selective memory, the writer is at liberty to weave her tale in the manner and sequence that serves her specific purpose. Tehmina Durrani's decision to pen her life-story illustrates the use of narrative
repair that serves to recreate and alter her understanding of her past from a retrospective
distance.

Durrani’s courage to break her silence and expose her thirteen-year marriage
with a feudal politician, Mustafa Khar, through an autobiography may not have had the
same value if such an account had been written by a Western celebrity and published in
the West. It is the fact that this book articulates in an impressive way the flaws in a
society that is dominated by patriarchal values and conservative religious mores, where
any form of public exposure by a woman is seen as an act of betrayal of the cultural and
religious values. Moreover, it acquires significance as a tool for resistance, and feminist
studies, as well as in its capacity as the first such intimate and detailed account to be
written and published by a woman in Pakistan. Durrani’s own identity as the
considerably young sixth wife of a powerful feudal politician, who was also the chief
minister of the Punjab province at the time of their affair, and her social status as a
Muslim woman from a wealthy and socially prominent family in her own right, were
factors that could have been the most powerful detriments to prevent her from speaking
out. Yet, these very factors played a part in her development and journey from a
divorced woman who used her own misfortune and experiences of abuse to reach out to
others with similar histories, both within her own society and cross-culturally, and
eventually her emergence as a feminist activist through the writing of them. It would be
unfair in Durrani’s context to evaluate her book in terms of literary merit, because
firstly, it was not written with an intention to that end, and secondly because it would
seriously limit a discussion of her very intent of writing it, and its relevance to the
feminist cause. On the contrary, a broader overview that inculcates socio-cultural
aspects of Muslim societies can explore the implications of such an exercise in the
wider cross-cultural context, particularly in terms of Muslim women writers.

Although Pakistani women have recorded their life experiences in the past
through their autobiographies, their intent had been to narrate their life experiences in
terms of their political and professional struggles and accomplishments. Benazir Bhutto,
later to be the first elected woman prime minister of a Muslim country, wrote, Daughter
of the East, recounting the political hardships faced by her family in their political
struggle for democracy and civilian rule in Pakistan. Though the book narrates incidents
of great personal loss such as the hanging of her father, elected Prime Minister Z.A.
Bhutto, by the military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, and the death of her brother; her intent is to

(144)
lay bare personal tragedies and struggles endured in the political context. Similarly, Shaista Ikramullah, in her autobiography entitled *From Purdah to Parliament* and Jahan Ara Shahnawaz in *Father and Daughter: A Political Autobiography* relate their experiences as participants in the independence movement during the British colonial period in the Indian sub-continent, and later their involvement in politics and the foreign service as an ambassador and women's rights activism and social welfare, respectively. These accounts hold importance primarily because these women, from the upper strata of the society, left the confines of conservative, veil-observing Muslim households to come out in the public as a show of their commitment to the national politics of their region and times. It is significant, and ironic, to note that all the women mentioned above chose to pen their personal experiences in English rather than their mother tongues as they belonged to the elitist strata of their societies, where despite the anti-colonial politics, English was, and remains, the common and preferred medium of communication, besides being a symbol of elite status and education.

Durrani's choice to originally write in English as opposed to her mother-tongue, Urdu, is also representative of her class as she was educated at a Convent School, where the medium of instruction was English and not the local language. Consequently, it is understandable that she chose to write her life-story in English rather than her native tongue. Ironically, it can be debated that this class, popularly referred to in Pakistan as the *brown sahibs*, feels and expresses its most intense sentiments and experiences not in its own languages but in the colonial master's diction. But, on the other hand, if Durrani's purpose was to get her story out, writing in English served her well in internationalizing her expose and bid for creating cross-cultural awareness.

She dedicates her autobiography:

To the people of my country who have repeatedly trusted and supported their leaders... leaders who in return, used the hungry, oppressed, miserable multitudes to further their personal interests. I want our people to know the truth behind the rhetoric, so that they might learn to look beyond the façade, so that they might not be stripped of the only right they have....their vote.

To the ex-wives of Malik Mustafa Khar who have silently suffered pain and dishonor, and seen him get away with impunity. This time one of them is holding him accountable.

To Malik Mustafa Khar. I want this book to serve as a mirror so that he becomes aware of the man, the husband, the father, the leader and the friend he is. (i)
Having established her premise for writing her story at the very outset, Durrani goes on to narrate incidents of tremendous emotional and physical abuse at the hands of the man she fell madly in love with and married after divorcing her first husband. Although it may appear as a naïve ambition to ‘diagnose’ the ‘deep-rooted deficiency in the feudal system’, Durrani’s autobiography does make a notable contribution in attempting to expose it, if not ‘uproot’ it. Her use of autobiography as a ‘method’ that Khar would never use is significant in its utility as a tool for feminist resistance and personal ‘vindication’.

Durrani splits her life and association with her former husband, Ghulam Mustafa Khar, into sections that span her life till 1990, including the nine-year exile period that the couple spent in London, UK, detailing the betrayals and humiliation that became a way of life for her till she decided to end her marriage. She starts the sequence of her journey backward in time to relate the various turning points in her association with Khar that ultimately led her to dissolve the marriage and step out of his shadows, and then to write her autobiography. She begins her account with the release of Khar from prison and the role she had played in campaigning for his release. (pp. 1-24) It is a time of promise and excitement for both of them despite their past differences, and Durrani happily looks forward to a different future that will be based on mutual aspirations for a political role to be played by Khar for the restoration of democracy in Pakistan. She recalls with obvious admiration and awe:

Mustafa always spoke with passion and absolute conviction. His words seemed like quotations. His arguments were sound and well thought through. There was a messianic quality about him which his chains served to embellish. I was obsessed with getting him out. A mind such as his should not be allowed to rot in jail. Here was a man whose experiences had sculpted him for this moment in history. He had a decisive and critical role to play at this juncture. His life was in danger. The forces arrayed against him are very forceful. If they perceived him as a threat to their very existence they could liquidate him. He seemed to have all the answers. (9)

It is pertinent to note Durrani’s honesty in recounting her own optimism and renewed faith in Khar as a measure of her idealism and naïveté despite the bitterness and realization to the contrary that would later shatter her faith in him both as a man and a political leader. For her own part during Khar’s detention and subsequent release, Durrani attributes her struggle and campaigning to her belief in him as a political leader who had his people’s best interests at heart and her own emerging political awareness in
the wake of the changing political climate in Pakistan and her husband’s mentorship and influence. She describes her newfound identity through symbolic outward changes in her appearance:

Years of exposure to a new world had done this to me. I rejected the superficial artifacts of respectability. Mustafa had converted me. He had through his words and actions made me into a serious person with a sense of mission. I had packed away my designer clothes and mothballed my vanity……. I belonged to another class. A class that thinks and takes its decisions consciously. A class that rejects accidents of birth and strives to find its true niche. I belonged to the ‘could have hads’. I was ashamed of my acquisitive nature. My wardrobe was excessive. My collection of shoes of Marcos proportions was obscene. Exquisite matching handbags would remain empty from now on. Something in me snapped one day. I could not be bothered with dressing myself up anymore. Colours still fascinated me but not on my body. I went to see Mustafa and told him of my decision. He was not at all shocked. He seemed to expect it. He had led me to it, he proudly supported my decision. From now on I would only wear white cotton. (22)

Durrani’s rejection of the restrictions of her social class enabled her to choose a different path for herself, one that would eventually liberate her even from the man to whom she attributes its initiation, and come full circle to emerge as the rights activist that she eventually became. It is pertinent to note here the candidness with which Durrani also exposes her own vanity, limitations, and longings throughout her autobiography as a means of reconciling with a past that does not suit her present.

Before these stirrings for a new and different political role were to find realization, her life with Khar was to take many turns, littered with betrayals, disappointments and abuse. To understand the motivating factors that eventually led to her autobiography, it is pertinent to trace her journey from one of an elitist wife to that of a battered woman silenced by fear and social considerations and inhibitions.

Durrani thwarts her religious and cultural conditioning which expects women to accept marriage as their final fate, without aspiring to another union or divorce, by admitting that her relationship with her first husband, Anees, despite its promising and romantic start and their daughter, had deteriorated into a dull union:

My marriage to Anees soon reached a plateau. There was no incline and no gradient. It was a bland relationship……. Monogamy and monotony became synonymous. The freedom I had craved for was there in abundance. I did not know how to use it or misuse it. I was to learn fast. (188)
It is in this state of mind and stage during her first marriage that the beautiful 22-year old Durrani is first introduced to Mustafa Khar, aged 42, at a party that she is attending with her first husband. What follows are details of the extra-marital affair she conducted with Khar when he was at the pinnacle of his political power in the 1970's as the governor of the Punjab province. Given her young age and a marriage that she is conscious is not offering the excitement she craves, Durrani finds herself vulnerable to Khar's position as a very important figure politically and his reputation as a charming and charismatic leader. She recalls her state of mind at the time:

Anees and I experienced none of the turmoil of a marriage turning sour. We remained passive. There were no quarrels. The squalls of infidelity had not yet invaded our boring calm. He was totally oblivious of the change that was invading my life. A more sensitive man would have noticed all those little signs that a woman contemplating adultery brazenly display.... Let him notice, God, please. Let him assert himself before I go over the brink. The abyss lured me. Enticed me. I knew I would fall. (194)

Despite the knowledge that Khar is an oft-married feudal, Durrani does little to avoid an affair that would ultimately lead her to divorce her first husband, giving up her claim to their daughter and possessions, and moving in with Khar while he is still married to another woman, Sheherzade. Khar proposes to Durrani while dancing with her at a party, an offer that she accepts, and then follows an affair that is built on deceit and exploitation of privilege and power. Given his political clout, Khar arranges for her husband to be sent to serve in another province, paving the way for Durrani to move into the Governor's House as Khar's willing mistress while his wife is also living there with their daughter. As a result of her liaison with Khar, who had a wild and dangerous reputation as a womanizer and ruthless political animal, Durrani's family severed its ties with her. The candid admission and expose of their romantic escapades while they were both married to other spouses is in itself a striking departure from the docility and privacy associated with Muslim women, both socio-culturally and in religious terms. Shattering socio-cultural gender taboos, Durrani volunteers intimate information regarding her heady affair while conspiring with Khar to dodge their respective spouses even in the face of their high profile social and political status.

Durrani divorced Anees and married Khar in 1976. What emerges thereafter is a strange threesome, which includes Khar's other wife, Sheherzade (Sherry), who, like Durrani, also belonged to the Pakistani elitist class. Sherry, despite being convinced that
Durrani is a transitory whim in her husband’s life and he would soon be rid of her for another, shares personal stories of his perverse and brutal nature, and the physically and mentally abusive relationship that she shared with him. Durrani recalls this strange union between two women tied together by a similarity of interests and predicament:

Sherry began to open up with me. She would tell me stories about Mustafa. They sounded like horror stories. They featured Mustafa as a sadist. A grotesque figure who derived pleasure from humiliating the ones he professed to love. She told me he suffered from an inferiority complex. He could not stand women from our family background. He resented them and had made it his mission to subjugate them. He disguised his class envy by putting on feudal airs. He was a coarse man. He was very angry with our class because we did not give him access. We never accepted him. His revenge was in his political ideals. His concern for the poor and the downtrodden was a sham. His hatred for the elite took precedence. He wanted to demolish the structure that ridiculed his origins and laughed at his lack of breeding and style. Women were his obvious victims. He was out to destroy our confidence. I took this in and stored it away. Future events would enable me to see what was true and what merely the ravings of a scorned woman were. (224)

However, Durrani did not have to wait long to see proof of Sherry’s accusations while they lived together. She narrates:

I noticed his impatience when he dealt with Sherry. He treated her with utter contempt and would abuse her using filthy language. I had never heard such expletives. My ears burned. I felt he was being unreasonable. Sherry was pregnant with his child. She was vulnerable. He never let her forget. (225)

Finally, after Sherry delivers a much-awaited son who dies a few days later, Khar discards and divorces her immediately, turning all his wrath and hostile attention to Durrani for the next 13 years. Looking back at her life with Khar, Durrani states her predicament and fears:

There was not a day in our marriage when Mustafa would not hit me for some reason. Delayed food, faulty water geyser, creased clothes, anything at all. Sherry’s stories became real. I became like Sherry. His whipping boy! The tragedy was that I had stopped questioning his violent outbursts. I knew that he would beat me if I dared to question him.... He ruled the house like a tyrant. Everyone in the house shuddered when he came home. I had become one of the serfs. He was the master. The lord of 22 kanals. Where deer roamed. Where chicken rooted. Where peacocks strutted. And family, servants, mother and wife all quaked... I know I couldn’t leave him. I had made a controversial marriage and had to strive to keep it. Although it was no longer based on trust, or love or respect, it was rooted in unmitigated fear. (231-232)
Throughout her book, Durrani makes repeated references to her ‘class’ as opposed to the ‘feudal class’ that Khar belonged to. It is not so much a sense of class superiority over her husband that emerges out of the bitterness that she is subjected to during her association with him, but rather an honest and naive attempt to put her circumstances and resultant outcomes in perspective in order to decipher the root cause of her humiliations and misfortune. The insight she offers into her family background is important in understanding her and her family’s reactions and decisions in the face of socio-cultural pressures and expectations. Daughter of a high-ranking banker father, hailing from the Afghan royal family, and an affluent elite class mother belonging to one of Pakistan’s most politically prominent families as a result of her father’s knighthood for services rendered during British colonial rule in India, Durrani describes her lineage as both a source of social prestige as well as conservative when it comes to their women and their expected roles in society. Given these impeccable credentials of birth, both socially and politically, Durrani falls in love with, and marries, Khar, a feudal who, although wielding political and individual power in his own right, is frowned upon by Durrani’s class as an opportunist and upstart. She describes Khar’s feudal lineage in great detail as driven by a lust for political power and position through betrayals, intrigues, deceptions and violence. What comes across is a charismatic man who has no qualms about his ruthless modus operandi when it comes to getting what he wants, be it political or personal success.

Her own disappointment and disillusionment in the man whom she had become to idolize as a leader and hope of the downtrodden in Pakistan are apparent as she tries in earnest to dissect his character and actions, and thereby the reasons for her own sufferings, through piecing together incidents from his childhood and political beginnings and how he maneuvered his political and social rise through manipulation of events and individuals. (Ibid, p. 245) she details Khar’s consequent political status as a popular leader of the masses, while espousing and furthering his own rise and political ambitions at their cost. She recounts his mingling with leaders of the Muslim world at the time like Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Libya’s President Muammar Gaddafi, etc, and the various political intrigues he was a part of that bordered on treason in Pakistan. Durrani paints a picture of Khar as an arrogant ‘political animal’ who stopped at nothing to secure his own political survival.
and safety even if it meant deserting his political party, the Pakistan People's Party, and negotiating with the military dictatorship for a safe exit into exile.

The next phase in Durrani's ordeal as a feudal wife begins when the democratically elected government of Z.A. Bhutto is overthrown by a military coup in 1977, resulting in the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, which also marks Pakistan's journey towards Islamization and religious extremism. During the initial period, Khar, along with other political leaders from the Bhutto government, were thrown into prison. However, given Khar's political acumen and maneuverings, he successfully negotiated with the army dictatorship to be released and allowed to go into exile with his family to London, UK. Durrani states:

While he was bullying and bludgeoning me, he was involved in serious political work. His domestic life was a side-show. He was in his element making and breaking alliances, plotting and scheming and persuading the skeptical. His intricate intrigues allowed him to survive in the jungle of exile politics where every political activist and leader soon developed an inflated opinion of their sacrifices and importance. (112)

In a bid to establish the inherent differences, and thereby reasons for these differences, between herself and the man who abused her as a matter of routine, she describes in detail the class and social prestige of her own family name, which, in Pakistani social terms, would otherwise have been a guarantee of social status and prestige, something that her marriage to Khar eroded in the eyes of her own family. Durrani offers the following background and analysis of her parentage:

It was natural for such a family to adhere to colonial values. My mother grew up in a home where the British way of life was slavishly aped and the Brown Sahib tried desperately to become very 'pucca'. The British rulers had allowed some natives limited access into their exclusive world. The Hayats were amongst the favored... The Hayat men were content with pursuing pastimes of the idle rich. They strived for sartorial excellence, played polo, learnt the latest dances, went on shikar and threw lavish parties. The women retained their Eastern charm, dressing exotically but became anglicized in their speech and behavior.......My father came from Abdali family which traces its descent to the royal house of Afghanistan. (164-165)

As for the class expectations regarding girls of her generation in her family, Durrani elaborates:

The ideal man for us, we were told, would be well-educated, preferably at Oxford or Cambridge, from good noble families...My parents had to be proud to announce that a match had been made with such and such a
boy... We were taught that marriage is a sacred institution and that we must on no account break our vows. If the man turned out to be a brute, it was our duty to persevere and attempt to change his character. A broken marriage was a reflection of our weakness as women. (181)

Ironically, dissolving her marriage with Khar in defiance of her socio-cultural conditioning proves to be the very juncture that ensures her release, salvation and eventual emergence as a strong woman and activist in her own right.

Durrani’s life with Khar in exile in London becomes the testing ground for not only the abusive nature of their relationship, but also her own disillusionment, endurance, and growth at multiple levels. In the chapter that she aptly titles “Contours of Hell”, Durrani narrates the incidents and outcomes that shaped her destiny as not only Khar’s wife but also as a sister, daughter, mother, woman and eventually as an individual who was acquiring the will, skill and resolve to shed her abusive life with the man whom, in her idealism, she had embraced as a champion of just causes. Whereas going into exile also spelt a reunion with her own family in London at long last, it also marked the beginning of yet another betrayal Khar’s incestuous affair with her 13 year old sister, Adila, who responded to his advances brazenly. This on-off affair, which was to last long enough, despite her protestations, Adila’s own marriage later on, and Durrani’s repeated separations from Khar, ultimately becomes the breaking point of both their marriages. Durrani narrates the pain and humiliation at the hands of her own parents who refuse to believe her allegations against her sister, her sister’s refusal to give up her liaison with Khar, and Khar’s manipulation of the situation by playing one character against the other to fulfill his own lust and abusive control over Durrani. She states:

In the past he had used my first marriage to beat me with. He would accuse me of having fallen in love with my ex-husband. I was capable of adultery. I had married him after another man......I was afraid that my slightest response to his advances would reinforce his image of me as some sort of a common slut. This was a feudal hang up. The feudal believe that a woman is an instrument of their pleasure. If she ever indicates that she has derived pleasure, she is a potential adulteress. She is not to be trusted. Mustafa did not even realize that he had crushed my sensuality. The consequences of refusing were too frightening. I would go through the charade realizing that I was functionally necessary. (51)

Despite a sense of her utility to the marriage, Durrani’s abusive life led her to a failed suicide attempt, which in turn led to further wrath and humiliation from Khar who accused her of failing to live up to his expectations as a wife and mother. Durrani
presents an analysis of the feudal mind which by now had come to rule her entire existence:

High on the list of percepts that had to be adhered to, were his views on the role of the wife. A wife was honour-bound to live her life according to her husband’s wishes and whims. A woman was like a man’s land…. The feudal loves his land only in functional terms. He will enclose and protect it. He will neglect it if it is barren. He will stay away from it and allow others to tend to its needs. For him land was power and prestige. It was property. So the feudal’s woman had to be covered properly, be docile, produce sons, remain hidden from strangers and make him happy by administering to his needs. (60)

Ironically, it is at the birth of her son, who is born in a National Health clinic in London as Khar’s way of degrading her, as opposed to a private clinic where a woman of her class would normally go, that Durrani makes first meaningful contact with other women who have simple stories to share. She recalls:

I came alive after this birth. I was curious again. I looked around and listened. Here around me were ordinary people. People we see on the streets or behind perfume counters or bowing or scraping to ‘madame’s needs’ in exclusive boutiques. Suddenly they were my friends. Our bond was our swollen bellies. We compared notes and told each other our stories, I knew about Harry and his problem with the bottle, about Sid and his ‘horrible boss’, about Nancy’s new fridge and Daphne’s new washing machine and how the nasty Hire-Purchase fellas had taken Trudie’s colour telly away because Frank was behind on the payments. I could see their little tragedies, I could share their joys. It did not matter where we were on the social ladder. (87)

Durrani’s growing awareness leads her to a rejection of Khar’s abusive behavior and serves as the breaking point in her docility and acceptance of a situation that treats her as subordinate and subservient. After her sister confirms her affair with Khar herself, and finding no support from her own family in dealing with the situation, Durrani is emboldened to take her destiny into her own hands and begins to contemplate a divorce from Khar despite the prospects of losing her children. After yet another routine incident of physical abuse, this time in the kitchen, Durrani suddenly retaliates by throwing a pot of hot food at Khar, saying:

The next time you raise your hand at me I will pick up a knife and kill you... Mustafa I have taken enough... I am not your sister or your mother. I am your wife. I am not bound to you by ties of blood. We have a contract to live together. I can tear that up whenever I feel like it... I find no necessity at all in living in this concentration camp. You correct your ways and make our lives worth living or I am going. (90)
After this incident in their marriage Durrani’s attitude changes drastically from one of subservience to a steady defiance that also entails exposing Khar’s violence to their friends. She says, “For a change I wanted Mustafa to be humiliated. I wanted this not to be my humiliation. I had suffered long enough behind closed doors. It was time this closet-wife-beater was exposed”. (100)

Durrani’s new-found confidence and defiance lead her to a legal separation while in exile in London. At this point Khar abducts their children and has them flown back to Pakistan to be hidden away in his feudal stronghold among family. Despite her resolve to fight back, Durrani once again finds herself swayed by social and family pressures and the future of her children and the fear of losing them. She makes yet another attempt, although not out of any love for Khar, to salvage the union and thereby avoid a broken home for her children. At this stage the Khars also end their exile and return to Pakistan to join active politics once again and mobilize public sentiment for a return to democracy. Durrani recalls nostalgically:

I found an excuse to remain his dutiful wife. I was suddenly in love with a noble idea—the return of the exiled leader…. I would not leave him as long as I believed in his politics and respected his ideals. I wanted him to show me that the myth of his courage was not a creation of folklore. This he could only do by remaining steadfast in his beliefs and not compromising with the regime. It was time to face the dictator. (42)

What followed their return to Pakistan was immediate imprisonment for Khar under the military dictatorship, which had sentenced him to 14 years of rigorous imprisonment in absentia, and Durrani’s fervent political campaigning for his release that in turn also initiated her own subsequent political career and identity. Looking back, Durrani remembers the day they arrived back in Pakistan:

“Suddenly every horrible detail of my marriage to Mustafa crowded into my mind. How was it possible that I was standing here not as that man’s champion and only hope? I had been to hell and back. I knew so well the contours of hell”. (45)

It is ironic that the very man who tried to crush Durrani’s spirit and growth through violent and deceitful means of control became the catalyst for her coming into her own and her consequent emergence as a political, social and feminist activist in her own right. As the ‘crusading wife’, Durrani experiences for the first time the travails of frustrations and excitement that accompany political negotiations and maneuverings, which lead to her own growth as an activist. For her it was a time to define her own
political ideals and path, regardless of the dictatorial climate of the country, and her status as a feudal elite wife more accustomed to luxury than mobilizing crowds and political party workers. Her decision to chart an independent course brought her new friends that included young and idealistic journalists, activists and political workers. Durrani describes her political development at the time:

During my involvement in active politics I found myself evolve from a robot that Mustafa had programmed, to a thinking person who was capable of independent actions…. Gradually, I realized that his style of politics needed to be tempered. A woman’s touch gave the necessary softness and the sincerity which was needed during these difficult days. I believed in his cause but I found myself selling an idealized version of Mustafa’s political vision. In doing so, I might have distorted reality, but I proved that the ideal was workable. (317)

As a result of her campaigning and the sudden death of the military dictator in a plane crash in 1988, Khar’s release a year later was to mark her own political coming out party that was accompanied by public acknowledgement and success.

However, their personal life, which had never been ideal, suffered the final blow when Khar, a prominent political prisoner with high-ranking living facilities, raped Durrani in a prison suite on one of her visits. As a result she filed for divorce yet again while Khar was still in prison, and left with her children for England. But years of political association proved too strong for personal considerations and lured her back to Pakistan’s political arena once again. Durrani recalls the time and reasons for her decision to return:

Another poem of Faiz crept into my canvas. “I bequeath my life to the lanes and the alleys of my land, where the ritual of silence stalks. Where no one holds his head up high. And fear takes nightly walks”. I painted women with their heads bowed…These were the people that Faiz had written for, wept for, ordinary people with limited wants. They had penetrated my mind and had appeared on the canvas with the obvious message. Your land, its lanes, its alleys beckon you. You have to bequeath your life to that land, those people. Silence must not be allowed to proliferate. Fear must be confronted.” (301)

This political and social awakening was also to serve as a catalyst for Durrani to break her own silence, confront fear, and write her autobiography as a means of feminist resistance against gender-oppression and abuse through an expose of her ‘feudal lord’.

(155)
Durrani relates incidents of daily battering and marital rape during her thirteen-year marriage with Khar that produced five children, their political exile in London during the martial law years, Khar’s ongoing incestuous relationship with Durrani’s younger sister during their marriage, and later, her struggle and political campaigning to have him released from prison in Pakistan. She narrates several incidents of violence:

The violence lasted for more than 20 minutes. I remember my body being flung around. I remember it striking against walls. I remember something bursting in my ears. I remember something splitting. An agonizing pain in my eye. I recall something blowing up. I felt my lips swelling. I felt my face was suddenly out of proportion…. I could see a horribly mauled face. A mangled shadow of myself. As though I had just walked away from an accident. Someone had done this to me on purpose. I was totally shell-shocked. My face was contorted. My nose had merged into face which was horribly bloated. My cheeks were puffed up. My eyes had disappeared deep into huge purple patches. A capillary had burst in my eye. I felt a piercing pain in my ear…. We had to go an ear specialist, to an optician, to a physiotherapist. My eardrum, the capillary in my eye, the bruises and sprains had to be seen to. But I could not go in that state. It was more than apparent that I had been assaulted and battered. I had to endure the pain to keep up appearance…. It took 15 days for my face to return to something approximating my original one. It was only then that I could dare to venture out and see the doctors. (229-230)

From the above show of docility even in the face of tortuous pain and humiliation, Durrani goes on to narrate her decision to finally leave Khar, which resulted in having to forego all claims to property, inheritance, the custody of her children, and the severing of ties with her own siblings and parents, who had accepted her into the family after her first divorce and marriage to Khar on the condition that she could leave his home only in a ‘coffin’ (48). She not only sheds her submissiveness to her socio-cultural norms, but also announces it through a press conference in which she details her husband’s affair with her sister as the primary reason for divorcing him:

I called a press conference, for the first time in 13 years. I endorsed the veracity of what had been a rumour. I nailed the truth. I said that Matloob (Adila’s husband) was right. Mustafa and Adila were the reason for my divorce. I had denied it earlier for the sake of my sister’s home and my family. I also let it be known that Mustafa Khar had not only committed incest and thereby violated the injunctions of the Koran, he was also guilty of statutory rape. He had started the relationship with Adila 13 years ago when my sister was still a child. It went down very badly. People said that I should have been dignified. I felt like the millions of rape victims in our society, who walk away from the crime simply because of the shame of exposure. The villain must not be
allowed to use society’s queasiness as his cover. Women must learn to speak out or be damned. (363)

The question that arises is that what does Durrani achieve by deciding to reveal her life of torture and betrayal, and how should her exercise be rated in terms of its relevance to feminist resistance against oppression?

Durrani’s dedication makes her intention of writing her life story clear. She reconstructs her tortured past primarily as a way of putting her side of the facts on record, besides focusing on exposing the Pakistani feudal male elite from firsthand experience. In doing so, Durrani rebels against Islamic doctrines that value women as the subservient bearers of children and caretakers of the men in their lives. Through the very act of writing her life story, Durrani ruptures the socio-cultural and religious pattern that places a tacit obligation on Muslim women to remain silent about their own longings and sufferings. In the process, she also breaks the feudal concept of women as a man’s property and honor as she comes into her own, and establishes her identity and honor by exposing and dismantling her ex-husband’s feudal mentality. Reflecting on her decision to break her silence Durrani explains:

For a woman to reveal her intimate secrets, in our closed society, will be considered obscene by many. But silence is a greater crime. It condones injustice. It breeds in us subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy. Mustafa Khar and other feudal thrive on our silences. (360)

After a meeting with her ex-husband to discuss their children’s future, when he informs her of his next marriage to the twenty-year old girl, Durrani notes:

He said, “The girl I am to marry has a greater capacity to love me than you ever had”. I was stunned at his superficiality. I had loved this man despite what he had done to me. I had loved him in spite of what he was. We had spent 15 years of adversity together. This poor innocent girl did not even know what he was. She only knew what he had revealed to her. They only met one month ago. That day I took two decisions. I told him, “I will give no statements about you any more”. He looked surprised and pleased. “Not even about my marriage”? I looked at him proudly. “No”. The other thing that I decided to do that day was to write this book. I decided not to waste fifteen years of my life. I decided to share my life so that our people might become aware of our politics, our leadership, their values, their mentalities, their Islamic principles and their views on women. I decided to cast a stone at hypocrisy that is endemic because of our silence. I sat down. I wrote. (365)
Trained to endure a marriage in the name of social success, regardless of the emotional price exacted in the process, and the cultural stigmas attached to revealing one’s private life in any manner, Durrani’s decision to marry below her class both times, divorce and eventually pen her life-story proves her resilience and resolve to expose the hypocrisy and suffering that is camouflaged in the name of maintaining social status and appearances and upholding family honour in Muslim patriarchal societies. South Asia historian, Ayesha Jalal, offers the following critique of Pakistani women from privileged classes and their stake in maintaining the status quo through subservience to their social order as women rather than challenging its oppressive patriarchal nature:

Educated urban middle and upper class in the main, these women have toyed with notions of emancipation but carefully resisted challenging their prescribed roles in society. Such deference is merely the outward expression of a deeper and largely subjective consideration: the stability of the family unit and by implication of the social order itself. As beneficiaries of social accommodations worked out over long periods of history, middle and upper class women everywhere have a stake in preserving the existing structures of authority, and with it the convenience of a subservience that denies them equality in the public realm but also affords them privileges not available to women lower down the rungs of the social hierarchy. (Jalal: 79)

Largely true as Jalal’s assumptions may be in general, Durrani for one shatters the notion that women of privilege, who have everything to gain by maintaining the status quo, rather than rocking the boat, regardless of personal suffering and humiliation at the hands of a gender-discriminatory social and religious system, by using her class and social position to do just that. Born into the lap of luxury that could have rendered her just another high society socialite, Durrani takes on the task to shed this ‘convenience of subservience’ to a system that dictates her subordination as a woman in all her roles, and candidly reveals a life punctured by extreme humiliation, abuse and betrayals in spite of her class privilege. In the process, she also exposes the double standards and hypocrisies that are at play within her own class as a means of preserving a scandal-free social standing in society. The very act of recording and sharing these experiences becomes an act of feminist resistance against patriarchy and bonding across cultures with women, regardless of their social class and cultural calling, who can identify with her gendered experiences of oppression.
My Feudal Lord serves as an example of a Muslim woman’s independent search for ways and means to secure a life that would be free of fear and abuse in a society and class that endow her with gender-based restriction and social pressures to conform to the dictates and expectations of a patriarchal order that allows little room and opportunity for an independent identity for a woman. Even her own parents, all too conscious of the stigma of having a divorced woman in their family, discouraged her from leaving Khar, thereby endorsing a pattern conformity in the name of family honour and social acceptance. Durrani’s refusal to succumb to a life, man and a system that impose oppression on her as a woman is in itself a tremendous act of resistance when seen in her cultural, social and religious contexts. Further, her conscious decision to share her life story, knowing full well the consequences of opposing and exposing a system and a man who are too powerful to put hurdles in her path in society, serves as testimony to the utility and power of women’s autobiography as a means of feminist resistance. Durrani’s expose renders her a transformed woman who has shed her docility and submissiveness at great personal price, and emerged as an individual who refuses to compromise or tolerate oppression in the name of socio-cultural hypocrisy. Journalist Shabina Nishar Omar elaborates:

Patriarchal discourse limits and transcribes the image and identity of Tehmina but she inverts the social and familial constraints to emerge as a new woman. She strives against all odds to escape all forms of essential categorizing that render the subaltern or minority woman both the victim and the unwilling perpetrators of damning stereotypical metaphors both by Eurocentric imperialism and the patriarchal tenets of her Islamic society, the power politics in Pakistani Government and the social ethos of Pakistani marital life. Tehmina is urging her readers and other socio-culturally repressed sisters to rediscover their marginal self and thereby gain emancipation and empowerment. (Omar: 2004)

Durrani’s situation and story resonates with those of many other Muslim women across cultures who discovered their feminist calling under similar circumstances and experiences of gender oppression to become feminist activists.

Though there is a tremendous diversity among Muslim women, they also share common gender-based oppressions across cultures. Iranian human rights activist and academic, Mahnaz Afkhami elaborates:

The infringement of women’s rights is usually exercised in the name of tradition, religion, social cohesion, morality, or some complex of transcendent values. Always, it is justified in the name of culture. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the Muslim societies, where
over half a billion women live in vastly different lands, climates, cultures, societies, economics, and politics. (234)

This diversity stretches across Africa, Central Asia, South and South East Asia and the Middle East and calls for cross-cultural communication as a means of feminist bonding for mutual learning and support in the struggle for liberation from socio-cultural and religious constraints. Martha. C. Ward explores the cultural aspects of autobiographical writing, and how each account can be distinct from the other despite similarities:

Real cultures are very slippery, shambling creatures. They are not just in our heads. So where they come from is crucial to understanding women’s lives. Autobiography, like life as we know it, is not one size fits all......Today many of us share a belief that feelings are natural—that we all have the same response to the same event, or that any given event will predictably have the same effect on us. But feelings are not prescribed. For example, a husband dies; a wife is secretly relieved. A husband dies; a wife finds her life torn asunder. Autobiographies are not the truths of objectivity, facts, or science; they are the truths of lived experience, of shared stories. There is no right way or strong way to be a woman—or to tell a woman’s story. (xiv)

It is this very quality of transcending cultural differences and yet finding understanding through the telling of women’s stories that enables women to narrate their life histories to a female readership that finds little difficulty in identifying with them, and relating their own life experiences with the torments and joys of one otherwise distanced by culture, customs and traditions, status, language, and faith and beliefs. For example, women writers in the Muslim world have successfully managed to reach out to each other through the narration of their personal ordeals and triumphs, the one common factor being either writing in English, it being the most widely spoken and understood of languages, or being translated into it. It can be argued that whereas translation of literary texts can be lacking in conveying the cultural metaphors of one language and culture into another, nevertheless when it comes to autobiographical writings, the colonial language has served as a useful feminist tool of communication to spread awareness of cross-cultural struggles and situations through the sharing of personal stories and concerns.

Regardless of the language used, it is invariably the “I” in autobiography and women’s stories and accounts that resonates to serve as a collective “we”, leading to a connectedness that needs only the gendered understanding of each other’s predicaments to make itself understood across cultural barriers. In the process of narrating their life
stories, many Muslim women have also broken the traditional religious and cultural
Taboos of conforming to the accepted and expected dominant ideals of docile female
behavior in Muslim societies. By speaking out, they have challenged the norm in these
societies to treat women’s lives and experiences as a strictly private matter within the
family. This ‘coming out’ in the public arena has been primarily made possible by
Muslim women gaining formal education at college and university levels and their
participation in various professions, including politics, hitherto dominated by men.
They have also used academia and literature to provide an international audience with
documentary proof of their resistance against fundamentalist religion and cultural
discrimination.

Just as new mediums of communication have erased spatial boundaries
considerably, they have also unified women’s causes, and movements and issues across
the world. Aided by technology, this development in terms of cross-cultural networking
can be considered as testimony that globally women’s primary concern is still the
struggle against gender discrimination and inequality as the very foundation for
women’s liberation and rights movements in their respective cultures and societies.

In the post-colonial context women writers and activists from across cultural
and geographical divides have been instrumental in challenging gender oppressions and
patriarchal norms through personal narratives and literature. Many Muslim women
writers and activists have successfully managed to re-translate their past into
contemporary contexts as a means to initiate dialogue and struggle for their rights as
women and individuals in their respective Muslim societies. Whereas they may reject
the colonial designs of bracketing all eastern/Muslim women in the same category, one
of oppressed and subservient gender, they have gradually started to redefine the post­
colonial theory as per their own terms, realities and social and historical conditions.
These women have struggled to carve out a niche for themselves by expounding and
critiquing the traditional imperatives of culture, patriarchy and religion in the Muslim
world and in the process have begun to reject the sexual colonization of their gender.
Their memory and experiences of post-colonial gender-based marginalization, despite
national liberations in their respective countries, have imbued writers and feminists in
the Muslim world with the resolve to step out of the shadows of male domination as
much as an act of resistance and defiance as the quest to redefine their roles without
rejecting their Muslim identities and keeping in step with the changing times and

(161)
challenges. While discussing on the colonial racial construct and stereotypes of Asian women during colonization, Ania Loomba elaborates:

The veiled Asian women becomes a recurrent colonial fantasy, as does the recurrent figure of the Eastern Queen, whose wealth testifies to the riches of ‘the Orient’ and whose gender renders those riches vulnerable to the European self. The Biblical story of Sheba arriving laden with gold at Solomon’s court and willingly surrendering her enormous wealth in return for sexual gratification initiated a long tradition of stories in which the desire of the native woman for the European man coded for the submission of the colonial people. (153)

The rejection of such colonial memory has served as motivational energy for new constructs and identities for Muslims. Post-colonial Muslim nations have not only ventured to shed these colonial constructs, but also many Muslim women today have carved out a path to emancipation that challenges the oppressive measures within their own cultural and religious parameters as well. Homi K. Bhabha, while discussing the process and outcome of delving into the past for answers and guidance for the present, notes that this act of remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection, but is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present”. (xxiii) It is in this sense that postcolonial Muslim women writers have used the trauma of their individual and collective pasts to question the constraints of their present religious, cultural and patriarchal domination and discrimination, and ventured to constitute a framework and roadmap for the future within which their voices can be heard distinctly as women’s voices for justice and equality as opposed to political nationalist ranting that does not cater to their specific needs, but rather uses their marginalized status temporarily in the service of political identity and national pride. Robert J.C. Young explains on women’s predicament in this context:

As women participated alongside men in nationalist struggles for the emancipation of their country, they also sought to win their liberation as a sex, by claiming rights, equality, access to public space and public activism, and to education. As long as these demands were compatible with those of the liberation movement (as they were in most socialist-based movements), two worked well together in a complimentary way. Where the liberation movement was not thoroughly socialist in its political agenda, however, for example in India, relations were more conflictual. Independence removed the colonial power, but by no means guaranteed that the new state regarded women’s emancipation as a primary component of its political agenda. (370)
However, as colonized countries gained independence one by one, women's emancipation and demands for equality and liberated status continued to be overlooked by the dominant forces of patriarchy and religion. Despite national independence, women were awarded a subaltern-like status which was not only demeaning, considering the active role they had played in supporting the liberation of their countries, but also led to a renewed struggle for freedom from the shackles of patriarchal and religious dictates of subordinating women. This movement in the Muslim world, however small and marginalized still, has gone on to produce feminist theologians, academics, literary writers and artists and social and political activists.

Muslim postcolonial feminist writers have taken the first steps to question and critique Islamic culture and practices from within its own theological framework to situate the status of women as individuals and their forced subordination to patriarchy in the name of religion, male honour and nationalism. Additionally, they have questioned their own political, social and gender histories to redefine the sources of their particular oppressions in order in formulate strategies for emancipation and equal rights. Leila Ahmed comments on the realities that operate cross-culturally today, arguing the importance of cross-cultural acceptance of each other, not only in the Muslim world but also between the Muslim and Western world:

But what is needed is not a response to the colonial and postcolonial assault on non-Western cultures, which merely inverted the terms altogether and a rejection or incorporation of Western, non-Western, and indigenous inventions, ideas, and institutions on the basis of their merit, not their tribe or origin. After all and in sober truth, what thriving civilization or cultural heritage today, Western or non-Western, is not critically indebted to the inventions or traditions of thought of other peoples in other lands? And why political, technological, or of any kind, because it originated among some other tribe, or, conversely, be compelled to practice a custom that has nothing to recommend it or even much against it for no better reason than that it is indigenous? (237)

Similarly, Fatima Mernissi critiques the historical politicization of Islam from within its own ranks to serve vested interests:

Not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies. Since all power, from the seventh century on, was only legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false traditions. A false Hadith is testimony that the Prophet is alleged to have done or said such and such, which would then legitimate such an act or such an attitude. In this conjecture
of political stakes, and pressures, religious discourse swarmed with traditions that legitimated certain privileges and established their owners in possession of them. (8)

Analyzing the hurdles faced by Muslim feminists, Egyptian activist and academic, Nawal El Saadawi, highlights the impediments to women’s emancipation within Arab societies themselves:

We the women in Arab countries realize that we are still slaves, still oppressed, not because we belong to the East, not because we are Arab, or members of Islamic societies, but as a result of the patriarchal class system that has dominated the world since thousands of years. To rid ourselves of this system is the only way to become free. Freedom for women will never be achieved unless they unite into an organized political force powerful enough and conscious enough and dynamic enough to truly represent half of society. To my mind the real reason why women have been unable to complete their emancipation, even in the socialist countries, is that they have failed to constitute themselves into a political force powerful, conscious, and dynamic enough to impose their rights. (xv)

The various themes of domestic violence, emotional abuse, lust and extramarital sex betrayal and infidelity, fear, feudal power and its obsession with women as symbols of honour and male status in Muslim societies, and the abuse of political power, etc, strike a chord between women’s experiences across cultures because of their commonalities, as is evident from the success of accounts like Durrani’s My Feudal Lord. In some ways this exercise has also been facilitated and simplified due to the common operating codes through cultural symbols, practice and Islamic laws that prevail over women’s status in all Muslim societies, albeit by varying degrees. Additionally, through their refusal to be passive witnesses and through their production of autobiographical writings, Muslim women writers have also become the historians of their times and particular cultural and socio-political situations from a feminist standpoint. Through the telling of personal tales and literary writings that entail autobiographical details, women’s autobiographical writings have served as intimate witnesses to their respective histories of wars, oppressions and struggles as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters as opposed to merely factual or circumstantial accounts that are devoid of the human toll of shaping destinies of nations and individuals. For example, discussing the possibilities of recording wars by women, Miriam Cooke, author of Women and the War Story, notes that:

...there is no one history ...about war that has greater claim to truth but that history is made up of multiple stories, many of them herstories,
which emanate from and then reconstruct events. Each story told by a person who experienced a war, or by someone who saw someone who experienced a war, or by someone who read about someone who saw someone who experienced a war, becomes part of a mosaic the many colours and shapes of which make up the totality of that war. Yet however exhaustive my research and reach, I cannot encompass this totality: I can always only tell an individual story....the woman who has lived war not as a victim but as a survivor, who may not have borne arms but who has played all the other roles a war culture prescribes. Should she submit her experiences to others' labeling?....It is the growing understanding of the ways in which patriarchy seizes and then articulates women's experiences so that they will seem to be marginal and apolitical that now drives women as creative artists and as critics to re-member their pasts and then to write them. (4-5)

By the same token, it is the individual accounts that have served simultaneously as commentaries and bridges that can collectively transcend cultural, political and class barriers because of shared sufferings, losses, standpoints and resistance.

Similarly, Durrani, because of her intimate closeness to her country’s politics as Khar’s wife, in her autobiography records insider facts, political maneuverings, intrigues, betrayals and socio-cultural observations from a woman’s and spectator’s perspective that would otherwise have been lost.

It can also be argued that if the problems facing women in Muslim societies are similar, then the struggle for reform and solutions can also be strengthened by a collective expose of religious and gender discrimination through cross-cultural bonding by Muslim women's writings. As the “I” and “You” merge to produce a collective “We” as a result of stories of shared experiences, Muslim women’s reconstruction and analysis of their past renders autobiography as an important feminist tool for creating cross-cultural awareness and networking, and contributes towards a collective resistance against shared oppressions, fears and subordination to male hierarchies in their respective societies. What stands out in the writings of Muslim women’s autobiographies, however small and marginalized in numbers, is the conquering of their religious and socio-cultural fear of claiming the agency to reveal their lives, thereby leaving a permanent trace of writing, which in itself is a victory against the silence most Muslim women are subjected to. Muslim women’s voices through autobiographical accounts have also broken the Orientalist stereotype of eastern women as docile and subservient subjects of patriarchal cultures and religion. In recording and translating personal histories, they have successfully defied the individual and collective repression
of their experiences, rendering the exercise as empowering and a valuable addition to feminist activism.

Autobiography serves as a purgatory and healing process as the writer, instead of denial, comes to terms with a bitter past, and instead of carrying the burden of their experiences as isolation, shares them as a means to a therapeutic renewal and transformation through narrative repair. Durrani states that after their divorce, her ex-husband said to her: "Tehmina, you are nothing anymore. Once you were Begum Tehmina Mustafa Khar. Now you are just Tehmina Durrani. When you ring up people, you have to introduce yourself as my ex-wife" (357). She was to answer this later after the publication and international success of My Feudal Lord: "Well, Mustafa, now the world will soon know you only as Tehmina Durrani’s ex-husband" (382).

In Durrani’s case, writing an autobiography not only purged her of her burden and catapulted her from an abused housewife to fame and recognition, but her catharsis also turned her into a feminist activist who came into her own through a realization that speaking out was not only an option, but also a must in a society that inflicts oppression and pain on women in the guise of cultural and religious mores and capitalizes on their silence. In challenging these mores, Durrani has questioned their validity for all Muslim women cross-culturally who are subjected to similar suffering and discrimination. Her experiences and expose find resonance in the accounts of other Muslim women writers who collectively serve as a bonding for a unified struggle against religious and patriarchal gender-oppression.

The experience and truth of the conscious moment when she decided to write an autobiography may only be known to Durrani herself, but her journey from a housewife to a center stage women’s rights activist also led her to write two more books, one a fictionalized biographical book about the abused wife of a Pakistani feudal religious leader, entitled Blasphemy (2000), which she claims is a thinly veiled true story that reveals the exploitation of power within Pakistan’s religious circles, and the other a narrated biography of a social worker in Pakistan entitled A Mirror to the Blind (1996), both of which received wide acclaim and have been translated into several languages.

In 2000, Durrani’s activism took another turn as she was confronted with yet another tragic incident when her former husband’s son from another marriage poured acid over his young wife, Fakhra’s, face as an act of revenge for an alleged affair. She
turned up at Durrani’s doorstep for help. As part of a defiant and continued struggle against feudal treatment of women, Durrani took up the cause despite threats from her ex-husband’s family. She mobilized enough support within Pakistan and internationally to force the Pakistan government to have the girl sent to Italy for reconstructive surgery. Since then, Durrani has been instrumental in arranging a joint venture between an Italian charity organization, Smile Again, and Depilex beauty salons in Pakistan for establishing outlets across the country for immediate help, reconstructive plastic surgery and rehabilitation for the victims of acid and kerosene attacks. Her efforts in this direction are also a result of the threat she herself was faced with when during their marriage Khar threatened to throw acid on her face.

Although Durrani has been accused by her detractors, mostly consisting of her own elite class, of securing publicity for herself by exposing her personal life, her achievement lies in exposing a feudal and political system that, given the power they enjoy, few would dare to critique within the country, leave alone a woman. If she paid the price of being disowned by her family, who, because of their own social and political standing, accused her of exposing too much, it can be said in her defense that she secured a victory of sorts for all those women who have been silenced by their circumstances, and may be suffering a fate worse than the writer’s had been. Whether it was an act of vengeance that proved successful in writing My Feudal Lord or whether it was an act of personal catharsis that was long awaited and identified with by women in Pakistani feudal setup that led to a pioneering effort on the writer’s part, its cross-cultural appeal and success confirm the rationale for writing it. If language can contain experience, Durrani has used the personal to reveal not only her individual story of struggle and survival, but in doing so, has also used autobiography as a vehicle for cross-cultural bonding and collective struggle for women’s rights. Durrani’s situation resonates with those of many other Muslim women across cultures, as mentioned earlier, who have discovered their feminist calling under similar circumstances and experiences of abuse and gender oppression to become feminist activists.