

Surrendering Body and the Rebellious Soul: Woman, Body and Space in Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy*

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Abstract:

Tehmina Durrani's highly discussed novel Blasphemy, which claims to be "inspired by the true story" (Durrani 5), is a probing study of institutionalized evil that wears the mantle of religion. This novel depicts the struggle of an Islamic woman to redeem her soul against shocking instances of cruelty, sexual perversions and violence. This paper is an attempt to see how Heer, the protagonist and the narrator, at once articulates the horrific account of how Pir Sain, her husband and the religious head, abuses and confines her body, and on the other hand records the growth of her rebellious soul.

The paper tries to analyze different spatial dimensions that the novel configures and how Heer alters mentally, the fixities of these gendered spaces on her way to redeem herself. It also tries to show how the female protagonist resists spiritually and mentally the religious imposters who prey on powerless people and women.

Key words: Woman, Body, Space, Tehmina Durrani, *Blasphemy*

Do you not feel claustrophobic here, as if something as great as life is trapped in a tiny needle-box? Do you not feel like bursting out of it? (Durrani 109)

Blasphemy is Heer's re-counting and narrating of her life of utter seclusion and *purdah*, stringently observed in the abode of her husband Pir Sain, coupled with spiraling and circular

stories and events narrated to her by the women-folk of the Haveli. Heer narrates, in the first person, her forced marriage to Pir Sain, the exalted descendent and leader of an ancient Shrine based in rural parts of Southern Pakistan. Heer, an exquisitely beautiful girl, is hardly fifteen years old when her widowed mother imposes this wedding to an almost forty year old Pir, primarily to “lift” her “burden” and “torestore (her) dignity in the community”(25). Relinquishing her dreams of higher education, love and future with Ranjha, Heer steps into Pir’s household, where she is expected to observe a life of absolute *pardah* –total confinement within the “square walls” of Haveli – along with the family’s matriarch and her mother-in-law Amma Sain, other females and maids. With no friends or access to external world, under Pir Sain’s complete subjugation, Heer suffers twenty four years of physical abuse, successive rapes, regular violence and beatings, twisted Islamic distortions, sexual perversions and a sadistically battered life. On one hand, she protects her daughters, Guppi, Munni and Diya, from their father’s incestuous lust by pimping out the orphan girl Yathimri, ‘widow’s’ daughters and several other young girls, whereas on other occasions she is forced to prostitute herself to protect her son Rajaji’ from his father’s wrath. At one point she says,

To me, my husband was my son’s murderer. He was also my daughter’s molester. A parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer, holding me by my throat and driving me to sin every night... He was the rapist of the orphans and the fiend that fed on the weak. But over and above all this, he was known to be the man closest to Allah, the one who could reach him and save us. (Durrani 143)

After what seems like a lifetime of abuse and torture, Heer contrives Pir’s death, along with the “robed figure”, an unexpected visitor to the Shrine, who, as later disclosed, happens to be Cheel, the hawk-like woman who was deployed by Pir as a guard/ jailor for his *zenana*. Followed by Pir’s death,

Heer chooses to expose the wrongs and religious aberrations perpetrated by her husband and his accomplices although her attempt backfires and she has to accept her family's staging of her own death to finally escape the mayhem.

What one finds noteworthy of detailed scrutiny is that against all oddities and inhumanity meted out to her, Heer survives, unlike Pir's first wife, who "had died of a weak heart that collapsed in the middle of her wedding night" (Durrani 49), and the second wife who "had a nervous fit that she seemed to not want to come out of" and "shuddered and trembled to death" (50). Heer not only learns to adapt to the ways of Pir's haveli, but also ends up using them to her own advantage – her survival, safety, and redemption. Amber Fatima Riaz delves more on this paradoxical gendered space of Pir's Haveli in her doctoral dissertation:

With its geographical and historical focus on rural Pakistan of the 1980s, the novel helps refigure the veil and the zenana as complex institutions – ones that are challenged and resisted, but also celebrated and used for personal gain (Riaz 137)

Perennially thrusting on "circling the square" walls of Haveli's courtyard, Heer devises her own stratagems to redefine and exploit the imposed gender roles within the confines of multiple spaces in the Haveli. Although warned by Amma Sain to maintain "distance from other women" (49), Heer befriends them and empathizes with them to an extent that one of these women helps in killing her evil husband. Never ceasing to mentally question her husband's religious exploitation, Heer's soul remains intact and prostrates on her prayer mat only before Allah, despite the fact that her body remains in the "poisonous tentacles" of Pir who coerces her physical participation in corrupt and heinous activities. In a way, Heer's very act of telling her story and narrating her miserable life lifts a veil, exposes what is otherwise considered "blasphemous", and subverts the pre-determined borders set by the patriarch. Riaz, while commenting on Heer's role as an

informer/narrator and her attempt at “making the world round” by her very expository narration, states:

I read Heer's act of narration of her true-real life experiences with Pir Sain as her subversive mimicry; her narration of her life is her (symbolic) rebellion... telling readers that she had to do whatever was possible to survive. (Riaz135)

Equipped with an uncanny imagination, knowledge of true and enlightened Islamic tenets, immense tolerance, never-ending faith in Allah and her religion, Heer's spirit tides over and subverts the oppressions entailed within the gendered spaces of Pir's household and she eventually negotiates the hegemonies of these spaces by her adherence to the actual Islamic injunctions. She herself says,

Life is either still or a raging storm... As you lose control in a storm, you have to ride the waves to survive, but drowning is easier than riding the waves. (Durrani 139)

In *Blasphemy*, Durrani enumerates, through Heer's perspective, a detailed narration of spatial dimensions configured and controlled by Pir in his Haveli as well as organization of these domestic spaces in a way that women and female sexuality get constricted in their specified fixities. However, one can also find that these spaces emerge as highly paradoxical – the Haveli seems at once to be male-controlled and limiting, where women are constantly abused, tormented and compelled to compete amongst themselves and even sacrifice others to save their own bodies, whereas, it also evolves as a specifically feminine space exploited by Heer and other few women, in a limited way, for their own survival. As Riaz enunciates this paradoxical space of female zenana configured in Durrani's *Blasphemy*:

Heer, in fact, is forced to accept, and even celebrate, the seclusion...and learns to use the seclusion of the zenana for her own gain, even though she consistently questions the need for seclusion. (Riaz89)

Although this secluded space pronounces violence, sexual perversions and orgies for Heer, it is the same enclosed and heavily bordered space that accords her a unique 'female agency', one where she transgresses her weak and powerless role and somehow plots her husband's death with Cheel, who in turn, avenges her forefathers. Moreover, Heer even manages to step out of the Haveli after Pir's death and tries to unsuccessfully attempt sabotage of the Shrine worship by exposing her husband's sadistic perversions. Haveli's domestic spaces are inaccessible to all men except Pir himself, and while the household apparently functions as a refuge/ protection to these women, it ironically shackles them to sadism, and sexual excesses at the hands of Pir. Amidst these complexities, one can note that Heer stoically capitalizes on using the seclusion to her own benefit, yet never ceases to question her confinement, consistently "circling" her "square patch":

I began to circle the mud-plastered square.

Repeating, insisting, and confirming:

'My world is round like God made it. I'll make it round like everyone else's'

Circle after circle, every day... (Durrani 45)

A close analysis of the Haveli's gendered spaces foregrounds the courtyard, the kitchen and Heer's bedroom as most nuanced spatial attributes:

The world could not penetrate hell.

The walls rose high into the sky and enclosed the square space I was doomed to inhabit. Along the boundary wall surrounding the compound was a barren flowerbed...

There were no openings to the outside except the entrance door and that, too, was screened from view by a short brick wall... Running along the left of the courtyard was the kitchen covered with net meshing under a thatched roof... The back door was bolted. The side door led directly to the graves and nowhere else. (Durrani 45)

Amber Riaz also comments on the spatial dynamics of Pir's Haveli and sums it up as:

In the novel, the zenana is divided into three zones, all of which impact Heer's position within the household differently. The courtyard is a vibrant space, where most of the household's women...congregate. The kitchen [is] the second zone of zenana... It is the dark cavernous bedroom, the third zone of the zenana...that cloaks sexual and physical abuse. (Riaz 114)

It is the courtyard where Amma Sain, "sitting on *charpais*" dispenses scribbled notes to the supplicants, the space where "women in colorful clothes" (41) celebrate Pir's wedding, and later the same courtyard gets "swollen with women", "beating their breasts" (12-13), lamenting and mourning Pir's death. The courtyard emerges as a communal space where Heer, despite controlled watchfulness of Cheel, reaches out to her female counterparts, befriends and interacts with them, listens to their stories and gains insights about their sufferings. For instance, tale of Toti and her Baluch murdered by one of the earlier pirs, Dai's "safe family fables" (60) about Pir Sain and his equally ruthless predecessors, "tales of other feudal Gods" (61) throw light on the Shrine's legacy of murder and torture. Toti's narratives illuminate Heer by giving her true information regarding how the Shrine was a mere manipulation and "a prosperous business", with pirs "trained for the profession" (87). In a household where a single utterance against the Shrine or its pir was synonymous with sacrilege, where freedom of speech inconceivable, where "God and master fused together in him [Pir Sain]" (83), Heer learns to maneuver her information thereby enabling her to receive a glimpse of outdoors as well as the secrets surrounding a maligned past of the Shrine. This storytelling and the courtyard camaraderie, in a way, helps obliterating a spatial and temporal demarcation. The courtyard is also the place where Heer falls in love with the maid Kaali, albeit nothing ever gets articulated verbally between them.

Heer also learns to communicate with eyes, shares remarkable camaraderie by simply winking, “cock[ing] up her eyebrows in response”, “fanning her arms out”, “frown at her”, “churn[ing] the ladle in the cauldron faster and louder” (53). Heer narrates,

We had mastered the language of chores to such perfection that... I was sure she understood what I said and Cheel understood nothing...

We even managed to play (Durrani 54).

In the early months of her marriage, while virtually playing and flirting with Kaali, amidst most hostile living conditions, Heer says, “I had tried to transcend my spirit and live in hers...” (56). The lived and shared space of courtyard, for Heer thus becomes emblematic of her soul’s struggle to find an antidote to her battered body’s abuse in the bedroom, an another sequestered spatial zone in the novel. In Heer’s bedroom, a space that she shared with Pir, “drapes were never drawn aside”, “windows were never opened”, “it was always dark”. She goes on to describe,

I looked around the dark and deathly room and noticed that the bed was like a grave. A headboard rose like a tombstone. Delicate carvings read my epitaph. The carpet, intricately woven with animal emblems, looked like a slaughterhouse (Durrani 40).

It is in this cloistered space, behind closed doors, that Pir repeatedly abuses and rapes Heer, forces her to sleep with strange men while “orchestrating, directing, repeating orders, and arranging (their) bodies” (161) for numerous sessions of pornographic filming. He forcibly intoxicates Heer, Yathimri and other young girls only to daze and abuse them sexually. It is here that Heer finds herself trapped and her body being corrupted to the extent of prostituting herself or pimping young girls or indulging in orgies only to keep herself alive. She is “introduced as Piyari, a whore from the city” (160), “falls in and out of unknown arms only to please the master.”(160), while

“the master” himself, the supposed intermediary between God and the masses, sits and watches “like an emperor at a show” (166). It is during these perversions of her husband that she constantly challenges mentally, the piety of the pirs, “(the) custodians of the people, revered for adherence to the faith, concealing their sins under (her) *burqa*”(164). Throughout her ordeals, she cries out to Allah, turns towards Islam for answers, but “every night the devil sucked [her] back into his black hole” (168). Her faith in her religion, however, remains untarnished, and rather gets reaffirmed after her confrontation with her Ranjha as ‘Piyari’, when she can’t help but long for “love in the midst of lust” (168). She thinks:

Surely, evil could not be so pervasive
Suddenly, I needed Allah.
I was shuddering at my sins... Only Allah could work a
miracle in my life.
...
Allah pulled.
Pir Sain pulled.
Pir Sain was stronger.
But only Allah could give me Ranjha.
I only needed Him. (Durrani 168)

Nevertheless, in the same bedroom, there comes a feeble moment when goaded by Amma Sain to please her husband, Heer, intoxicated by alcohol and pleased by Yathimri’s “tenderness”, enjoys her sexuality tentatively. The body that made her subservient and captive, that Pir Sain exploited and enslaved, suddenly finds a momentary respite:

He began to orchestrate our drunken bodies. We were no longer Satan and his victims. The wife he had gripped as tight as her own body, broke free.
Passion stirred. Fear disappeared. I lost the sense to remember rules. So did she. (Durrani 123)

Moreover, kitchen also emerges as an exclusive feminine space where Heer supervises the cooking of “*aam*” and “*khaas*”

breakfast trays and several other extensive meals. Although maids and servants fight and bicker during breakfast, for Heer this is the “most peaceful” time. Kitchen is yet another space where sometimes by covering up for a maid’s absence or by giving something extra to the needy, Heer mobilizes women’s sympathy and establishes bonds that help her tide over: “I merely became the weak leader of a weaker pack” (105)

In addition to Heer’s negotiations with the restricted spaces and pre-defined roles, her unequivocal faith in Allah and true Islamic tenets as against Shrine or grave worship festered by Pir’s venerable status as God’s “envoy”, helps keep her soul unblemished and endows her with resilience to survive and redeem herself. Despite her body’s forced submissions to Pir Sain’s corruptions, her spirit and soul prostrate singularly before Allah on her symbolic “prayer mat”:

Holy night converted into drunken orgy.
I had secret thoughts of prayer.
‘O Allah, notice me. Ask me why I am not on a prayer mat’
‘See me now. See me here’
My body prostrated before Pir Sain.
My soul bowed to Almighty (Durrani 171)

She further prays,

Free us like our Prophet freed the people of Mecca from the curse of *jahalia*. Awaken us. Tell the people you have no envoy. Tell them you need no envoy. Restore my faith. Take him away. Take him up. (171)

Though Pir colonises and suppresses Heer’s body and sexuality, he can hardly affect her prayers as her soul is only welded to Allah:

Every *Jumeraati*, I stood at Babaji’s grave and pretended to pray for my husband’s health. Instead I prayed that I return to find him dead” (175).

Also, against Amma Sain’s dictate to read “original” Holy Book in Arabic to merely gain “*sawab*” for simply reading it, Heer

secretly reads “translation of the Quran” in her dressing room and lets the Holy Book explain the meaning of her religion, first hand, without a pir intervening or a Shrine mediating the comprehension.

Besides, it can also be examined that Heer's prayers and urges to Allah are always paralleled by her constant critiquing of the hypocrisy, distortions and exploitations perpetrated by Pir under the “*purdah*” of religion- “everything corrupt happened under the shroud”, “concealing their sins under my *burqa*”(164). She criticizes that the “*burqa* had become a license for corrupt men” (165), which allowed them to introduce her as “a whore from the city because no one had ever laid eyes on the venerable wife of pir.”(164). Heer vehemently critiques multiple layers of paradoxes in the veiled religious defamation. For instance, as Piyari, the prostitute, she is allowed to step out of the Haveli only to please strange men:

Sadly, stepping out meant nothing. Cheel's presence, my husband's company, the darkness of the tunnel, and the two small net holes in my burqa let nothing through. I counted five hundred and sixty two steps to our destination. (164)

Throughout the narrative, one finds Heer mentally interrogating and resisting Pir's religious hypocrisy –he beats Heer for wearing bangles and not veiling before a six year old male, but contrives and witnesses Kaali's sexual abuse by several men; rapes Heer while she is in labor, killing the baby, but conveniently ignores his debauch brothers and his own incestuous “lure of innocence” for his own daughters; rapes numerous young girls like Yathimri, while beats and murders Chote Sain, his own son for having “dared to rape Yathimri”; barks at Heer to “abort the child” so as to sleep with her after the holy month of Ramadan, while he publically drapes “*chaddar* embroidered with ninety-nine names of Allah” (166), forces Heer to consume alcohol during his orgies, but himself “drinks fresh goat's milk”; enforces Heer's orgies (even on twenty-eight day of Ramadan) with strange men as Piyari, the

whore and films them. Heer goes on thinking, interrogating and questioning these masked sins of “venerated” Pir Sain: “I was shocked that he allowed himself a sin he allowed no one else” (83)

It must be noted, however, that she never questions Islam or any of its tenets, but mentally decries its deformation at the hands of pirs while impoverished masses of the region continue to seek Pir’s scribbles in “*zafran* ink” or his “sacred breath”. Unlike them, Heer, continues to mentally ask whether her husband is truly “exonerated” or is endowed with any “supernatural” powers, silently questions all the aberrations- Kaali’s death and torture, Tara’s killing, Toti’s suffering and merciless killing of her Baluch lover:

It had reduced Islam to fit into the palms of pygmies.

They played with it like putty.

Middlemen and salesmen had converted Muslims into grave worshippers. They led us back to the time of *jahalia*, back to the conditions our Prophet had freed us from, back to the very reason that had called for Islam. (Durrani 103)

Fueled by this gross religious defamation through perverted whims of Pir, and a lifetime of abuse, she braves to express her wish to the “robed figure”: ‘I want my husband’s death’. She herself admits and sums up the implications of her courageous enterprise:

Contemplating the murder of a religious leader of thousands of illiterate people needed supernatural courage. Transforming myself from a slave to master of my own destiny would need a miracle.

Pir Sain was a symbol of *munafiqat*.

I was a soldier.

This was a *jihad*.

In my eyes... The only thing truly in the name of Allah was Pir Sain’s death (Durrani 181)

Followed by her husband’s death and Cheel’s tragic demise, Heer furthers her endeavor at “cutting corners...making

circles”(183), and decides to shatter the deeply entrenched, false and evil system of grave-worship by exposing Pir Sain, at the stake of her own reputation:

I realized that guilt was a trap. It had to die before I could live. Under the shower, I connected to the divine and thought of every possible way to rid myself of my husband's clinging curse, until I was left with only one option... And there could be no peace, except in revenge. No change without exposing Piyari.

The decision was taken in my heart... The fog cleared up... Long years of torment eased. (195)

She begs Allah to allow her a moral transgression, to “use” herself to expose the evil concealed by the Shrine in His name. That she willingly takes a course to uncover the fiendish system by identifying herself as Piyari, the prostitute and Heer, the Pir's wife as one, leading to her own condemnation “in the name of Allah”, is highly commendable and a testament to the Heer's ever-resilient soul:

To me, burying the evil and preserving my reputation meant preserving the evil. No exposure meant no change. I knew I had done the wrong thing for the right reason. (209)

However, when her own son Rajaji, the successor of Pir Sain, together with his uncles, attempts to preserve the “power of the Shrine”, try to “lock” and “confine” Heer yet again, she accepts a total obliteration of her identity and accepts her family's staging of her own death, to become “someone else”, “not a *pir's* widow and not a *pir's* mother, but someone else” (225). That she anonymously visits her own grave emphasizes Heer's incredible ability to survive Pir's sadism.

Thus, despite the impregnable fortification of Pir's Haveli and bordered “spaces” therein, innumerable violations of her “body”, Heer makes the “square” walls permeable; she finds resources for her “soul's” survival in adherence to Islam, her bonding with other women in the feminine spaces, her

imaginative “flight into God’s world”(78), in facing her fears stubbornly, “telling” her story, thereby transcending the confines of space and as Amber Riaz points out, emerges as a new kind of feminine agency:

Blasphemy’s account of a specific type of (fractured) zenana, and a new type of female agency...deliberately ruptures, interrupts a reading of the Muslim zenana as either a violent, abusive space or a liberating one... it also enables women’s collective agency, one that is predicated on women’s communal power, and their ability to band together to get rid of (some of) the patriarchal forces that perpetrate violence in the name of religion. (Riaz135)

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