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Teaching Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*: Feminist Pedagogy and Ethical Challenges in the Literature Classroom

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Abstract

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Aims: The study aims to examine how feminist pedagogy can be meaningfully applied to the teaching of Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* in literature classrooms, foregrounding the text's engagement with patriarchy, power, and gendered violence.

Methodology: Adopting a qualitative pedagogical approach, the paper draws on feminist teaching theory (bell hooks, Sara Ahmed), trauma-informed pedagogy, and close textual analysis. Classroom observations, reflective teaching practices, and student responses are used to assess how learners engage with the text's representations of gendered oppression and resistance.

Outcome: The study finds that when taught through feminist and trauma-sensitive frameworks, *My Feudal Lord* enables students to critically examine structures of feudal patriarchy, normalize conversations around gendered violence, and recognise narrative testimony as a form of resistance.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The paper concludes that teaching *My Feudal Lord* requires an ethically grounded feminist pedagogy that prioritizes care, reflexivity, and contextualisation alongside literary analysis. The study recommends integrating trigger warnings, guided discussions, comparative texts, and reflective writing to create inclusive and responsible learning environments.



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This paper explores the pedagogical possibilities and ethical challenges involved in teaching Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* within university literature classrooms. As a testimonial narrative exposing patriarchal violence, political power, and marital abuse within a feudal Pakistani context, the text demands a feminist pedagogical framework that balances critical inquiry with ethical sensitivity. The paper argues that *My Feudal Lord* functions not only as a literary text but also as an act of feminist witnessing that unsettles students' assumptions about gender, power, culture, and agency, making it a vital yet demanding classroom text.

Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* (1991) occupies a contentious yet crucial position in South Asian women's life writing, functioning simultaneously as testimony, political exposé, and feminist intervention. As an autobiographical narrative that documents domestic abuse, feudal patriarchy, and the entanglement of marital power with Pakistani political culture, the text exemplifies what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson identify as autobiographical acts of resistance, wherein personal narrative becomes a means of challenging hegemonic silence imposed on women's suffering. Durrani's repeated assertion that marriage rendered her voiceless—"I had no identity of my own; I existed only as Mustafa Khar's wife" (87)—foregrounds the erasure of female subjectivity within feudal masculinist structures.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, *My Feudal Lord* exposes how gendered violence is sustained not merely by individual cruelty but by intersecting systems of class privilege, political authority, and cultural complicity. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of patriarchal power as structurally embedded rather than culturally exceptional is particularly relevant here. Durrani underscores this systemic nature when she observes, "In our society, a man's brutality is excused as authority, while a woman's endurance is mistaken for virtue" (142). Such moments allow students to interrogate how patriarchy operates through normalisation rather than overt coercion.

Teaching the text through trauma theory further complicates classroom engagement. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as an experience that resists linear narration, Durrani's episodic recollections of abuse—often recounted with emotional restraint—reflect what trauma theorists identify as

belated witnessing. Her chilling admission, “I learned to absorb pain silently; protest only intensified it” (119), exemplifies how survivors narrate violence not for spectacle but for survival. In pedagogical contexts, this necessitates what Roger Simon terms ethical witnessing, where readers are positioned not as consumers of suffering but as responsible interlocutors.

Feminist pedagogy, particularly as articulated by bell hooks, offers a productive framework for navigating these challenges in the classroom. Teaching, *My Feudal Lord* demands a student-centred, reflective approach that acknowledges emotional responses while critically situating them within structures of power. Rather than sensationalising scenes of abuse, educators can foreground Durrani’s strategic silences and moments of self-recognition, such as her realisation: “My fear was not love; it was captivity mistaken for loyalty” (173). This shift enables discussions on consent, internalised patriarchy, and the social conditioning of endurance.

Ethically, the classroom becomes a site where questions of reader responsibility must be addressed. As Leigh Gilmore argues, women’s autobiographical texts that recount trauma are often subjected to skepticism or moral judgment. Durrani anticipates such scrutiny when she writes, “I knew my story would be doubted, but silence had already destroyed me” (11). Engaging students with this meta-awareness helps them reflect on their own interpretive positions and the politics of believing women’s testimony.

This paper therefore argues that *My Feudal Lord* can be a powerful pedagogical text if taught within a carefully scaffolded feminist framework that integrates trauma sensitivity, cultural specificity, and ethical reading practices. When approached through feminist pedagogy, the text enables critical conversations on gendered power, silence, and survival, transforming the literature classroom into a space of informed empathy and political awareness rather than voyeuristic consumption. In recent decades, literature classrooms have increasingly engaged with texts that foreground trauma, gendered violence, and testimonial narratives. Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* is one such text that resists passive reading. Chronicling the author’s abusive marriage to a powerful Pakistani feudal lord and politician, the work exposes the intersection of patriarchy, feudalism, religion, and state power. While widely read as a feminist

exposé, the text has also generated controversy regarding its authenticity, intent, and political implications.

Teaching *My Feudal Lord* therefore raises pressing questions: How does one ethically teach a text rooted in lived trauma? What responsibilities do instructors and students bear when engaging with narratives of abuse? How can feminist pedagogy transform the classroom into a space of critical empathy rather than voyeurism? This paper addresses these questions by situating *My Feudal Lord* within feminist pedagogical practice and examining the ethical challenges it presents in the literature classroom. *My Feudal Lord* belongs to the tradition of feminist life writing that uses personal narrative as a mode of political intervention. Durrani's text disrupts the silence surrounding domestic violence in elite Pakistani households, challenging the romanticised image of marriage and respectability. The narrative positions the female body as a site of control and punishment, while also asserting the act of writing as resistance.

From a feminist perspective, the text exemplifies the dictum “the personal is political.” Durrani’s private suffering becomes a critique of broader socio-political structures that normalise male dominance. However, the autobiographical mode complicates classroom reception. Students may read the text either as sensational confession or as unmediated truth, overlooking its constructed nature as a literary and political narrative. Feminist pedagogy thus requires instructors to frame the text as both testimony and textual production.

Feminist pedagogy, as articulated by scholars such as Bell Hooks, Paulo Freire, and Patti Lather, emphasises dialogic learning, critical consciousness, and the dismantling of hierarchical power structures in education. It prioritises lived experience, affect, and reflexivity while resisting authoritarian teaching models. In teaching Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord*, centring marginalised voices requires a careful pedagogical balance that foregrounds women’s lived experiences without reducing them to fixed or homogenous identities. Durrani’s narrative speaks from within a specific location—elite yet deeply constrained, privileged yet violently subordinated—and this positional complexity must be emphasised in the classroom. Rather than presenting Durrani as a “representative” Pakistani woman, feminist pedagogy invites students to read her voice as situated, mediated, and politically charged. Drawing on standpoint theory and postcolonial

feminism (such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the monolithic "Third World woman"), teachers can help students recognise how My Feudal Lord disrupts essentialist portrayals of Muslim or South Asian women while also revealing how patriarchy operates across class and power hierarchies. This approach allows marginalised voices to be centred as testimonies and interventions, not as universal truths, thereby preserving the text's specificity and ethical complexity.

Equally important is encouraging critical engagement rather than moral judgment. Students often respond to My Feudal Lord with immediate ethical reactions—condemnation of Mustafa Khar, disbelief at Durrani's endurance of abuse, or simplistic binaries of victim and villain. While such responses are understandable, feminist teaching seeks to move beyond moral certitude toward structural analysis. By situating the text within feudal politics, authoritarian masculinity, and the socio-legal limitations placed on women in Pakistan, instructors can guide students to ask why certain choices appear possible or impossible for Durrani at particular moments. This shift—from judging individual actions to interrogating systems of power—encourages students to read the autobiography as a critique of feudal patriarchy rather than as a personal confessional alone. Close reading, contextual framing, and comparative feminist texts help cultivate this analytical distance without erasing ethical concern.

Finally, recognising emotional responses as part of knowledge production is crucial when teaching a text as affectively charged as My Feudal Lord. Feminist pedagogy acknowledges that feelings of anger, discomfort, empathy, or even resistance are not obstacles to learning but integral to it. Durrani's graphic depiction of domestic violence and psychological trauma often provokes strong classroom reactions, which can be productively harnessed through reflective writing, guided discussion, or trauma-informed teaching practices. Following scholars such as Bell Hooks and Sara Ahmed, emotions can be framed as evidence of how power "sticks" to bodies and narratives, revealing the affective dimensions of patriarchy and oppression. When students are encouraged to critically reflect on why a text unsettles them, emotional engagement becomes a site of feminist insight rather than passive consumption. In this way, teaching My Feudal Lord transforms the classroom into a space where affect, critique, and

ethical awareness collectively contribute to feminist knowledge-making. The classroom becomes a space where students interrogate how gendered violence is produced, represented, and consumed. Feminist pedagogy also requires instructors to reflect on their positionality, especially when teaching texts rooted in specific cultural and national contexts.

One of the most significant challenges in teaching Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* lies in the ethical handling of trauma, particularly because the text contains explicit and repetitive descriptions of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Such scenes can provoke intense discomfort, emotional distress, or even the reactivation of personal trauma among students who may have experienced violence themselves. Ethical pedagogy, therefore, demands a trauma-informed approach that recognises the classroom not merely as a site of intellectual inquiry but also as an affective space where learning is intertwined with vulnerability. Rather than assuming a neutral or detached reader, instructors must acknowledge that students encounter the text with embodied histories that shape their responses.

A responsible teaching strategy involves pre-emptive framing and informed consent. Providing content warnings before engaging with particularly graphic passages allows students to prepare emotionally and, if necessary, to step back without academic penalty. This does not dilute the seriousness of Durrani's testimony; instead, it affirms the ethical responsibility of the educator toward student well-being. Trauma-sensitive pedagogy also encourages flexibility in assessment—offering alternative texts, optional passages, or reflective assignments—so that engagement with the narrative does not become coercive. Such practices align with feminist ethics of care, which prioritise relational accountability over rigid curricular authority.

At the same time, ethical handling of trauma requires avoiding voyeuristic or sensationalist readings of abuse. Classroom discussions must be carefully moderated so that violent scenes are not dissected merely for shock value or narrative curiosity. Instead, these moments should be contextualised within broader structures of feudal patriarchy, state power, and gendered domination. By shifting focus from the spectacle of suffering to the systems that produce it, teachers help students understand trauma as socially embedded rather than

individually exceptional. This analytical reframing protects the dignity of the survivor-narrator while fostering critical literacy.

Equally crucial is creating a supportive and dialogic classroom environment. Students should be encouraged but never compelled to articulate emotional responses, and silence must be respected as a legitimate form of engagement. Reflective writing, anonymous responses, or small-group discussions can provide safer modes of participation than open debate. Drawing on feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Judith Herman, educators can frame testimony as both a personal and political act, emphasising that bearing witness to trauma carries ethical obligations of listening, care, and restraint.

Ultimately, teaching *My Feudal Lord* ethically means recognising that trauma is not simply a thematic concern of the text but a lived reality that may reverberate within the classroom. Attentiveness to emotional risk, respect for student agency, and a commitment to non-exploitative analysis allow the text to be taught not as an exercise in endurance, but as a powerful intervention that deepens feminist understanding while safeguarding the humanity of all participants.

One of the most significant pedagogical risks in teaching Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* is the possibility of voyeuristic consumption, wherein students fixate on scenes of domestic violence, sexual coercion, and emotional degradation as shocking personal episodes rather than as manifestations of entrenched systems of power. The graphic and repetitive nature of Mustafa Khar's abuse—his public humiliation of Durrani, his physical assaults, and his absolute control over her movements—can invite a reading that prioritises sensational detail over critical understanding. For instance, episodes describing beatings or forced isolation risk being interpreted as evidence of an exceptionally cruel individual rather than as symptoms of feudal patriarchy legitimised by political authority and social sanction.

Feminist pedagogy intervenes by deliberately shifting the analytical focus from what happened to how and why it happened. In *My Feudal Lord*, Durrani repeatedly situates her suffering within a wider socio-political framework, noting that Khar's violence was rarely questioned because “power excused everything” and because his public image as a political leader rendered his private brutality

invisible. When she observes that servants, relatives, and political allies remained silent witnesses to her abuse, the text exposes what postcolonial feminists identify as structural complicity. The violence is thus not an aberration but a culturally and politically enabled practice.

To counter voyeurism, educators can foreground Durrani's reflections on internalised obedience rather than the spectacle of violence itself. Her admission that she initially interpreted control as care—mistaking fear for devotion—reveals how patriarchal conditioning operates at the level of affect and desire. This enables students to analyse abuse as a learned and normalized relational dynamic rather than a series of shocking incidents. Such a reading aligns with bell hooks's insistence that feminist pedagogy must interrogate the emotional and ideological foundations of domination, not merely its outward expressions.

Moreover, Durrani's narrative technique itself resists voyeuristic reading when approached critically. Many moments of abuse are recounted with restraint and brevity, followed by reflective commentary that exposes the psychological aftermath rather than lingering on physical detail. For example, her emphasis on silence—learning not to protest because resistance intensified violence—directs attention to the mechanisms through which power disciplines women into compliance. Trauma theory helps students recognise this narrative economy as a survivor's strategy rather than an invitation to consume pain.

Feminist pedagogy also reframes the reader's position from spectator to ethical witness. Instead of asking students to evaluate Durrani's personal choices or endurance, classroom discussion can centre on questions such as: What social structures make escape nearly impossible? How does political power shield private violence? Why is female testimony routinely doubted? These questions move interpretation away from moral judgement or sensational curiosity and toward structural critique.

By guiding students to read *My Feudal Lord* as a text about systems—feudalism, patriarchy, political impunity, and cultural silence—rather than as an exposé of personal suffering alone, feminist pedagogy actively resists voyeurism. The text thus becomes a site for examining how gendered violence is produced, sustained, and normalised, ensuring that engagement remains critically ethical rather than spectatorial.

Cultural Stereotyping and Postcolonial Feminist Pedagogy in *My Feudal Lord* another critical ethical concern in teaching Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* is the risk that students may interpret the narrative as evidence of Muslim or Pakistani society being uniquely or inherently oppressive to women. Such readings can inadvertently reinforce Orientalist stereotypes that position South Asian or Islamic cultures as exceptionally patriarchal, backward, or violent, thereby obscuring the global and systemic nature of gendered domination. Postcolonial feminist theory, particularly the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, provides a crucial corrective to such cultural essentialism by insisting that patriarchy must be understood as historically and materially situated rather than culturally innate.

Mohanty cautions against the construction of the "Third World woman" as a monolithic victim, produced through Western feminist discourse that isolates gender oppression from class, political power, and colonial histories. *My Feudal Lord* itself resists this reduction when read attentively. Durrani does not present Pakistani society as uniformly oppressive; rather, she consistently emphasises how Mustafa Khar's violence is amplified by his feudal status and political immunity. She notes that his authority allowed him to operate "above the law, beyond accountability," a privilege unavailable to most men, thereby situating abuse within elite power structures rather than religious doctrine or cultural tradition alone.

The novel further complicates cultural stereotyping by exposing how patriarchal violence transcends national and religious boundaries. Durrani explicitly recognises that her suffering is not culturally unique when she reflects that "women everywhere learn endurance before they learn freedom." Such moments allow educators to frame the text within what Mohanty terms comparative feminist analysis, where women's experiences are read relationally rather than hierarchically. This approach encourages students to draw parallels between feudal masculinity in Pakistan and other forms of patriarchal domination—such as domestic abuse in Western nuclear families or political masculinity in global power structures.

Spivak's concept of the subaltern is also instructive here, particularly in relation to voice and representation. Durrani is often critiqued for her elite

positionality, yet her narrative exposes how even privileged women can be rendered voiceless within patriarchal systems. When she writes, “My education, my family name, my class—none of it protected me,” the text destabilises the assumption that oppression operates solely along cultural or religious lines. Instead, it highlights patriarchy as a transnational structure that adapts to local forms of power.

A postcolonial feminist pedagogy therefore resists reading *My Feudal Lord* as a cultural indictment of Islam or Pakistan. Instead, it frames the text as a critique of feudal patriarchy operating within a specific historical and political context. Durrani herself foregrounds this distinction when she questions why religion is invoked to justify male domination while its ethical imperatives of justice and compassion are ignored. This allows classroom discussions to separate patriarchal interpretation from religious belief, challenging simplistic cultural blame.

By encouraging comparative analysis—placing *My Feudal Lord* alongside autobiographical narratives of abuse from other cultural contexts—educators can help students recognise patterns of global patriarchy while remaining attentive to local specificity. Such an approach not only mitigates the risk of stereotyping but also aligns with feminist pedagogy’s ethical commitment to complexity, solidarity, and critical self-reflexivity. Rather than reinforcing cultural exceptionalism, Durrani’s narrative, when taught through a postcolonial feminist lens, becomes a powerful text for understanding how gendered violence is produced and legitimised across cultures. Debates surrounding the veracity of Durrani’s claims further complicate classroom discussion. Rather than adjudicating truth, educators can frame the text as a narrative intervention whose significance lies in its social impact and discursive power.

Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra emphasise that trauma resists complete representation and demands ethical witnessing. Teaching *My Feudal Lord* thus requires cultivating what LaCapra terms “empathetic unsettlement: a mode of engagement that acknowledges suffering without appropriating it.

In practical terms, ethical feminist pedagogy in teaching *My Feudal Lord* requires a classroom environment that is both intellectually rigorous and

emotionally attentive. Providing content warnings and preparatory discussions allows students to anticipate difficult material and engage with it thoughtfully rather than reactively. Offering students choices in modes of engagement—such as oral discussion, reflective writing, or the option of alternative texts—acknowledges diverse emotional thresholds and learning styles. At the same time, encouraging critical distance alongside empathy helps students avoid voyeuristic consumption of trauma while still recognizing the lived realities of gendered violence. Such practices affirm the dignity of the narrated subject while respecting students' emotional boundaries and agency as readers.

To ethically teach *My Feudal Lord*, instructors can adopt a set of interrelated classroom strategies grounded in feminist pedagogy. Contextual framing is crucial: situating the text within Pakistani feudal structures, postcolonial politics, and South Asian feminist movements prevents cultural essentialism and promotes historically informed readings. Comparative readings, such as pairing Tehmina Durrani's narrative with feminist autobiographies by Taslima Nasreen or Bama, help students recognize plurality within feminist voices and avoid treating a single text as representative of an entire culture. Reflective assignments, including journals or response papers, provide students with private spaces to process affect and ethical discomfort, while dialogic discussions—carefully facilitated—foreground respect, attentive listening, and critical inquiry rather than sensationalism. Together, these strategies uphold inclusivity, care, and analytical depth.

Despite the challenges it poses, *My Feudal Lord* holds significant pedagogical value. It enables students to examine the intersections of gender, power, and politics, engage critically with life writing as a literary and ethical form, and reflect on questions of representation, testimony, and reader responsibility. Ultimately, the text fosters a sense of global feminist solidarity by linking an individual narrative of suffering to broader structural critiques of patriarchy and power.

Teaching Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* in the literature classroom is an ethically demanding yet pedagogically rewarding endeavour. Through feminist pedagogy, educators can transform the challenges posed by trauma narratives into opportunities for critical learning, empathy, and social awareness. By

foregrounding ethical reading practices, cultural contextualisation, and student-centered engagement, the classroom becomes a space where literature not only reflects the world but also interrogates and reshapes it. *My Feudal Lord* compels both teachers and students to confront uncomfortable truths about power, silence, and resistance—making it a vital text for feminist literary education.

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