



**Unveiling the Misuse of Religion/Spirituality: A Study of 'Pir Sain'
(Religious Leader) in Tehmina Durrani's 'Blasphemy'**

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Abstract

Tehmina Durrani, a Muslim novelist talks about issues related to gender, mystic culture, and fundamentalism. She uses literary genre like novel to reconstruct and expose the socio religious autonomy by the religious leaders of her society. In her novel, '*Blasphemy*' written in 1998 the main character namely *Pir Sain* is a mystic character. He is a glorified soul and an exalted member in his community. However, his character seems to be more complex. As people consider him as their social security and many find refuge in his shrine, His knowledge of scripture and his role towards his society is not harmonious. The article studies the destructions caused by

the *Pir* in the novel which are juxtaposed with the module of Islamic social system in order to understand the rightful qualities of an Islamic setup. The ninth chapter of the novel named '*Killer waves*' represents the most heathen activities in the novel and hence is prime for the objective of this study. The paper aims to unveil how religion and spirituality is used as a tool to get power and to dominate the weaker sections of society. The novel takes the reader inside the secret life of so-called God man and exposes the hidden side of his bestial desires. The analysis and methodology used for this article is a combination of Islamic discourses with respect to its social system and literary discourses.

Keywords; Culture, Islam, Leadership, Mysticism, Pir, Saint, Security, Wife.

Pir and shrine in the novel

A pashtu proverb quoted in the book '*Economy and Culture in Pakistan*' says, "Though the pir himself does not fly, his disciples would have him fly." (Donnan, 221) Such is the case of the central figure in the novel '*Blasphemy*' by Tehmina Durrani. He enjoys his throne in a decorated shrine which is assigned to him by the people of his community. His wife believed that the power he possessed was bestowed upon him by the ignorant people. In Pakistan *Pir*, refers to a person "believed to possess occult powers inherited from a great sufi ancestor. Here the term pir applies to a mystic who separates tariqat from Shari'a, and who claims revelation of esoteric knowledge, the ability to perform miracles and to communicate with God, and the power of intercession on behalf of fellow human beings." (Donnan, 218) In the

novel Pir sain and his heritages inception is explained by a character Toti, who shares the details as, “A family of settlers acquired a small piece of land in the area. One of the sons was a malang who withdrew from everything to devote himself to deen. When the villagers began to gather around him under the banyan tree, his brothers called him a madman and threw him out. Homeless, he wandered around, until one day he climbed into the mountains and vanished. Ten years later, his followers brought his body back to the plains with a thousand stories of miracles attached to his name.” (Durrani,78) Many such miracles are mentioned in the novel one among them is mentioned as, “One day, the British rulers visited a hereditary pir who had the might of a god. Security was tight, armed guards were positioned six feet apart on the roof of the fort. The foreigners needed to witness the pir’s power before bestowing favours upon him. To display it, the pir looked up at a man on the ramparts, motioned with his hand, and the guard obeyed him by jumping to his death. With foreign patronage, the pir’s powers increased so much that even a century later people jump to death at the mere motion of his descendants’ hands.’ (Durrani, 55)

Pir Sain is married to the narrator of the novel, her name is Heer. Who is an orphan. She is told about the grandeur of Pir Sain and his Haveli by her relatives who prepare her to marry the saint. Pir Sain is the mender and advisor of everyone in his society, his mother Amma Sain talks about the shrine and says, “We are the direct descendants of the Prophet. The power of the Shrine is fourteen hundred years old. It cannot be challenged.”(Durrani, 55) Heer probes into Pir Sains prophetic insight

through the character Toti, who was an inhabitant of the village since a long time and knew about the undisclosed nature of the shrine. Heer asks her, ““Are they not directly descended from the Prophet? Are they not especially blessed by Allah because of their holy ancestry?” (Durrani, 79) Toti answers it as, “Do their actions in any way reflect our Prophet’s greatness? Do they, in fact, not resemble the Prophet’s bitterest enemies? They are impostors, imposed upon our hearts. They exploit our ignorance, our poverty, our losses and our limitations to rule over us. The Shrine is mercenary and political, it is not holy.” (Durrani ,80) Pir Sain uses the word of God to oppress the weaker, he however is a debauch, this article assembles *Pir Sain’s* involvement in many misconducts which he never allows anyone to see. Inside his room he was a ruffian and outside he was tender soul who only knew to solve the problems of his community. However, no one knew about the actual role of the Pir and the people who mostly guarded the shrine, Tehmina explains it as, “The Shrine and its gaddi nashin had a claim to everything that was produced through the sweat and toil of peasants and tillers. Before the poor took their crop home they measured and counted our share to the last grain. Cattle breeding and poultry were no exception. There again we had our annual share. Apart from this, our stores were full of provisions of every conceivable kind. If each person brought a kilo of ghee, there was an excess. It was the same with things like fabric, crockery, cutlery and electrical appliances contributed by manufacturers and agents. Somebody had given him a Land Cruiser, someone else a Lancer, and yet another follower had gifted him three Pajero jeeps. Those who owned little dropped whatever they could in the iron

moneybox welded to the floor of the Shrine. Those who owned nothing could sell themselves to please him.” (Durrani, 58)

Pir Sain : The Gaddi Nashin

“Though, according to Islamic doctrine, there can be no more prophets, the world and human society still require spiritual guides and guardians. For this purpose, God has chosen walis ("friends" of God) and assigned each a specific territory of the world to watch over. In a theory that has evolved from the thirteenth century, these walis, commonly known in Pakistan as pir.” (Ewing, 254) Their role is further explained as, “The original saint brought his followers closer to God by means of his spiritual blessing. He is the channel through which communication with God flows.” (Ewing, 256) Scott Kugle in his research about Sufis and saint bodies identifies verses from Quran which talk about responsibility and guardianship, he quotes in his book how Sufis took the authoritarian ship, “As human beings, we are charged with responsibility (khilafaj, the trust of responsible custodianship. We presented the trust to the skies, the earth, and the mountains but they refused to bear it and shied away. Rather, the human being bore it, even though the human being was wrong-doing and head-strong (Q 33:72). This is the challenge to imitate God or, to put it more humbly, to approximate God's care. As Sufis say, we are called to "take on the qualities of God" (takhallaqu bi-akhlaqillah).” (Kugle,31)

Similarly, in the novel Pir Sain is assigned a role of social counselling for clients who need it in the most disturbed emotional and social state. His spirituality is linked to

his higher knowledge of the holy scripture. Various community issues are brought to him which he claims to solve within the barriers of religion adding mystic knowledge to them. Heer the wife of Pir Sain says, "My husband would be told of matters that did not concern him at all. Everything simple was twisted and converted into an issue. Lies were fabricated, mischief and intrigue were rampant." (Durrani,45) Most of the mischief was associated to the women, "Although promiscuous women were commonplace and sex was rampant, the activity was not to be tolerated. Many evenings began with there port of a trivial error and ended up conducting moral discipline." (Durrani,45)

This article assembles many transgressions caused by the Pir, the major one is the oppression of women be it his own wife, Yathmiri a poor girl whose parents he tells that he would guide her to the righteous qualities and his own daughter Guppi. He transformed his wife into a whore forcibly and filmed everything, heer narrates one such situation as, "We passed a room with an intricate-patterned carpet below and a crystal chandelier above. Before we went through another door, Pir Sain told me to remove my burqa. I held my breath as a fat man with a big curled moustache jumped off the bed. He walked towards me, exclaiming loudly to my husband, 'Sain, baadshah, you are the greatest. What a find! What a rare jewel!' His big hairy arm circled my waist like an octopus's. His drunken eyes rolled as he drooled and slurred around my neck, mumbling, 'Where did the master discover you, my jewel? Where were you all my life?' My husband's laughter repulsed me even more than his

friend's blubbery lips.” (Durrani,153) The basic premises of Islamic ideology on the relation of husband wife is very clear as men are charged as protectors, they should evolve in this role within the light of Quran. About the relation of husband wife in an Islamic setup is explained by Daneshpour quoting Motahary in the paper, *'Muslim families and Muslim therepay'* saying “A Muslim husband wife should always be a source of comfort to each other. Their mutual relations should be far above mere sexual enjoyment and should reach the stage of cordial friendship accompanied by mutual benevolence.” (Daneshpour, 356) Pir Sain never showed any kindness towards his wife. His mother claimed that Pir had a prophetic vision little did he know how to be kind to his wife. Quran describes the relationship of a husband wife in the following verse, “Another of His signs is that He created for you from among yourselves spouses, so that you might find repose in them, and He created between you affection and kindness. Truly there are signs in this for people who reflect.” (khan 30:21) He used his Islamic knowledge and spirituality to achieve his bestial desires. His code of ethics outside his house does not meet his practices in the shrine. His ethics do not match a religious guide, In Islam conduct and ethics are very vital in order to transform a society. “Islamic ethics is a special form of social value. The nature of its good-oriented control system of religious morality is to restrain the Muslims. It is one means used by Muslims to carry out social coordination through their judgment of right and wrong and a self -perfection practice as well. Both ethical regulations and legal regulations must bring into play their social guidance and coordination functions, which, in the final analysis, is determined by people's

willingness of complying with and unconditionally abiding by these regulations.”
(Yuqin, 18-19)

Guppi his daughter was assaulted by him in the similar way, she explains things to her mother by saying, “He put his hand inside my shalwar. He also put it in my shirt and pressed me hard.” This frightened Heer and made her look upon the pir as a ghost living in their house. Heer exclaims her hatred towards him as, “A parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night. He was Bhai’s destroyer, Amma Sain’s tormentor. He had humbled Ma, exploited the people. He was the rapist of 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, 2014) The chapter killer waves expose the most heathen activities of the Pir, he treats his wife as a sexual object and offers her immoral things, one day she says, “Every new thing that he introduced into my life had turned out to be a nightmare, always impossible to accept, and with no time given to adjust.” (Durrani,2014) This new thing was a television which Pir had bought to create an awful air in his room, it visualised all the immoral things including naked men and women. Moreover, he forcibly indulged his wife to watch it. Heer explains it as, “After fixing wires and plugs to the equipment, Pir Sain banished the women from his hujra and settled in his chair. Bidding me to sit beside him on the floor, he pressed a button and the screen flashed on. My eyes became glued to it. I saw a street, it led to a house, a woman opened the door to a man and my

hands flew to cover my eyes. My husband pulled them away. The man took off his clothes and became stark naked. The woman became shameless. I could not look but I could not look away either. I burned and blushed and squirmed with shame while all the time my husband stared only at me.” (Durrani,2014) Many times he brings other women to watch over, he also breaks the purdah of his wife and the other women he brings along. He performed haram actions very frequently making women sex slaves. Indulging his wife and himself into adultery dilute his attributes of being a Pir. Quran guides Muslims on guarding their chastity. Islam neither allows fornication nor adultery, as Pir was married many times, he should have stopped himself from such immoral activity. In Islam, “a married person has no reason to commit zina since he or she can enjoy lawful sexual relations with his or her spouse. (Hassan, 2011) Also the punishment for zina and fornication in Islam is not based on any insincerity or hypocrisy , As discussed by Kecia Ali in the ‘*Sexual ethics and Islam*’, “Despite the double standard with regard to the number of lawful partners men and women could have, as well as how much say they had in the initiation, continuation, and termination of those legal ties, there was no difference with regard to punishment for sex outside those ties.”(Ali,62) These double standards are evident when he as an arbitrator looks at the case of a woman named Moti, who according to the community members has an affair with her husband’s nephew. Pir sain warns her in the following ways, “Tell me all before I hang you upside down and peel your skin off,” (Durrani, 2014) The Qur’an specifies one hundred lashes each for both the male and female participants in zina both for men as well as women. However, the punisher in the

novel changes the laws according to his own knowledge which suits him the best. Many actions by the Pir represent his biased character, his motif always seem to have a personal interest which did not uphold an Islamic perspective. For example, When Heer entered the new house she was told, She will have to observe strict purdah. “Our family traditions are ancient, they cannot change. She will have to adapt to them.” (Durrani,2014) “He never allowed anyone to know about the orders he imposed on his wife. This means he never ordered purdah to create a sacred space for his wife instead had a hidden motif which was linked to his personal desires and material achievements. Infact she met her first beating as a matter of not observing Purdah in front of a six year old boy which Heer states as, “The bangles splintered and scattered. Sharp shards of glass cut into my wrists. I heard a lion roar.....My first beating began in full view of everyone and ended inside. I had also disobeyed Allah by not observing purdah from a male whom I could marry. But he was only six years old.” (Durrani, 2014) Such agendas are explained by Siraj Asifa who quotes Secor in her papersaying, “one must consider the particular context in which it is worn, thus the politics of veiling is integral to the issue of Muslim women’s dress, and it influences the trends associated with women’s choices and social/political pressures placed on both the use and removal of the veil in public space. Similarly, Secor (2002) situates the headscarf within the context of dress and the ‘spacialized understanding’ that the headscarf produces. She observes that veiling is a ‘situated, embodied practice’ (Secor 2002, 7) with ties to space insofar as it allows, but also restricts, movement.” (Siraj, 719) Heer restrictions are mentioned by Tehmina in the

novel, Heer was not allowed to move from the haveli. Pir is regarded very close to God, a servant namely Yathmiri, is offered to Pir so that she could live in a sacred atmosphere in the assistance of the spiritual leader, as her parents are very poor and are not able to find her a good match, they let that happen in the hands of Pir. They thought that he would raise her spiritually and get her a good match. However things go differently, Pir puts her to use and arranges her marriage with a shepherd of a very character, the process is narrated as, “pir'suthni to me, which was that the pir's she-camel would be left to wander around the village freely until it chose a house before which it sat down. This signalled that the unwed daughter of the house was to be dressed as a bride and offered to the pir. Deflowered, the girl would be sent back home to live untouched by another man for as long as she lived. What was halal for the pir became haraam for everyone else.” (Durrani,2014). He now wants to get rid of her after exploiting her, he says “Pir Sain mumbled, ‘Yathimri cannot grow into an old maid in my attendance. It is my duty to Allah that I find her a husband.’” (Durrani,2014)

Patronizing people in such a way was the real aim of the Pir, these aims of the Pir were seen both by his wife as well as his mother Amma Sain but no one dared to gather him and tell his truth to the people. Despite of all this he is constantly trusted by his community. Gori a frequent visitor of Pir Sain tells Heer about his virtue, she comments “Your husband is so humble despite being all powerful. It's such an honour to have met him,” she declared. ‘What else?’ I inquired and she had more

words of praise for him. 'There is purity on his face. He is serene and peaceful. He works miracles. I've heard it from so many of his supplicants.' I couldn't help glaring at her when she exclaimed, 'So much tranquillity in the midst of poverty can only mean one thing. He provides the people with something divine.' (Durrani,2014) Pir Sain deceived people with his concealed nature. He promised people to guard them but in real caused them trouble. Even after his death he was praised by his people. When Rajaji his son was crowned and lifted to the rank of Pir sain, the people exclaimed, "Thank Allah, for covering our great loss with a great gain, for He continues to bestow His blessings upon us through His chosen ones." (Durrani, 2014) This shows how people chose guards without having knowledge of good governance and actual religion, also none tested Rajaji's knowledge about the holy scripture but assigned him a role which in real demanded religious knowledge, sincerity and humility. About this deficient intelligence in the book '*The role of Ulema in the modern age*' it is stated, "A strong team of competent people, men of character, is required to form a good government. These can only emerge from a society whose members have become receptive to Islam and where the political factors necessary for the stability of such a regime are present." (khan,52) The aims of Pir Sain as a saint and a religious leader are visible through the plot of the novel. He is not able to handle his elevated position for something right, he suppresses women in the novel very frequently without listening to their situations. This nature never made him eligible of living a saintly life, throughout the novel none of his qualities match parallel to any divine or saintly creature, the people of his community misguided

themselves by choosing a religious leader not from his knowledge but from a descent who performed a miracle which was by chance not by knowledge.

Conclusion

Through the broad understanding of this novel, the article concludes that the considerable success which Pir sain achieved was through chance, societal conditions and less awareness among the people of his community. Tehmina Durrani, the Pakistani novelist is able to show the rival ideology of the religious saints who use religion to fulfil their wishes, just as Pir sain who never wanted to construct a just society. People like Heer's mother in the novel had a different picture of Pir Sain on her mind, she thought he is a descendant of the holy shrine so his characteristics would match them, little did she know that her daughter would be molested there. Pir proved to be an unconcerned and amoral husband for Heer, Pir Sain praised the achievements of the prophets in the shrine and claimed to follow their way of life. But at home he behaved like a debauch who indulged in immorality and succeeded to be a pimp who destroyed the life of his wife. As the religion Islam teaches people to submit their wills and strive for truth Pir sain on the contrary gave up none. He could never provide any kind of provision to his community members. He only used the name of prophet and his religion to hypnotize people. He couldn't combat immoral things in his society instead promoted it. He used the Mosque/shrine as the centre for indiscriminatory things. No social work generated from his shrine nor did he use it as

prophet commanded it to be. “The mosque is regarded as an important centre for Islamic information, since it is the scene of political, social, cultural and ritual life. All the important news relating to vital issues are announced in the mosque and it also ensures direct contact between the carrier and the receiver of the Message. It is considered to be one of the most effective and successful means of da'wah and of giving information.” (Muhammad,8) So, I conclude that people should be aware of the teachings prescribed by the holy scriptures for the society, people can solve their problems through their own spirituality and dedication towards God, Pir sain who used the Mosque for his gains of collecting all the resources from the richest people around him only inveigled them. People who used to come to him sharing their problems with him always got him bounty of resources they thought that if they make him happy as if they are making God happy and through this entire process they thought that all their worries would vanish as they keep on pleasing the Pir. Educating people about religion in diverse and less educated societies has become crucial for many Muslim women writers in such cases analysing the social context and the position of women has become a crucial debate which needs to be reread and deeply understood.

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