



Tehmina Durrani's Exposition of Great Britain's Religious Hegemonic Designs in the Subcontinent in *Blasphemy*

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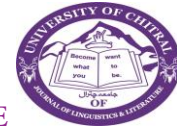
Abstract

This paper aims to analyze Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* in light of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. The paper dwells deep in the study of the religious hegemony of the colonial master in the subcontinent, particularly in the Muslim communities. Although the novel is set in after partition Pakistan, the issue discussed is very much related to the role of British imperialists in establishing religious hegemony. The paper takes a content-based analysis of the novel and unravels instances of religious hegemony. The plot of the novel illustrates how the British colonial masters, to subjugate the natives, fabricated the religious hegemonic ideas in the Muslim society of the subcontinent. Durrani has not only adroitly exposed the hegemonic designs of the British colonial masters, but she has also delineated the after-effects of such hegemonic ideas on the society in general, and on women in particular. This study also, from evidence present in the novel, tries to portray the history of shrines in the subcontinent and studies the behavior of the *Pirs* who rules these shrines and their attitudes towards women.

Key Words: Cultural Hegemony, Post colonialism, British Raj, Imperialism, Shrine Worshiping

Introduction

In its most simplistic form, hegemony can be interpreted, as a form of domination where “man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas.” (Bates 351) This straightforward definition of subjugation through ideals reflects the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebook*, defines hegemony as “the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci 12). This definition demarcates between two sets of governing policies. One primarily is associated with the use of force, which includes physical combat with the subjects, while the other is primarily related to the soft form of dominance, which is attributed to the approval of the masses of a certain ruling body. Hence, in the first case, domination is “exerted not by force, nor even necessarily by active persuasion, but by a subtler and inclusive power over the economy, and overstate apparatuses such as education and the media, by which the ruling class's interest is presented as the common interest and thus comes to be taken for granted.” (Ashcroft, Griffiths

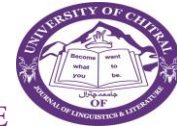


and Tiffin 106) Such domination seems beneficial to the masses and promises a bright future, but in its essence, it benefits the ruling class only.

Similarly, Destradi defines hegemony as “a form of power exercised through strategies which are subtler than those employed by states behaving as imperial powers.” (10) This definition implies a sterner form of hegemony, where the state does not take the role of an imperial master, rather portrays itself as a part of the subject class. On the other hand, Brander sees Gramsci’s concept of hegemony from a different angle. For Brander, “hegemony is the ensemble of cultural, ideological, religious, or also economic, political, and social tools through which such spontaneous consent is achieved.” (1) This definition implies that hegemony is a cultural issue, ingrained in the same culture through various cultural instruments. He also sees a semblance “between the political power and religion with the concept of hegemony in mind, under the perspective of how and through what channels leadership is established.” (Brander 1) This facade is very much evident in the case of societies where religious divisions are greater. These divisions then provide opportunities for the dominant class to penetrate and exploit the opportunities.

Furthermore, the theory of hegemony significantly supplements to a better understanding of the relationship, both social relationship and power relationship, between the colonizers and the colonized. Fusaro identifies an intimate affiliation between domination and hegemony, and asserts that “domination and hegemony are interrelated: the attainment of domination requires a certain form of hegemony and the realization of hegemony requires political power and domination.” (Fusaro 11)

In addition, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony proposes that a colonizer not only exercises his power through blatant use of force but also through latent hegemonic designs, to which the colonized willingly consent. It is through the hegemonic enterprise that the hegemon exhibits his dominance of a region. However, this dominance can only be achieved through the juxtaposition of the colonizer’s superiority of force and the social consent of the colonized. In other words, the colonized succumb to the dominance of the colonizer willingly, yet the colonizer uses covert force to implement his hegemonic plans. In the case of *Blasphemy*, Durrani points out that the colonizer’s use of force through the local comprador class of local *pirs*. In this case, the colonizer does not exercise force openly; rather use puppets to control the natives and to achieve their desired goals without their overt involvement in the process. The local *Pirs* works as an accomplice in the colonizer’s religious hegemonic designs. The means through which the colonizer exercises power can vary from the exertion of pressure to the provision of material incentives, up to the discursive propagation of the hegemon’s norms and values. The end of hegemonic behavior is always primarily the realization of the hegemon’s own goals. (Destradi 10)



Analysis

Moreover, in Litowitz's opinion, "Gramsci seemed to think that hegemony manifested itself at varying levels within the individual, appearing as both habit (that is, lived experience) and belief (that is, in a coherent body of beliefs supporting the dominant ideology." (515) This body of beliefs comprises of diverse elements, among which religion is one of the most prominent element. Hence, religious hegemony is more effective in relation to societies, where religion forms the basis of their individuality. The novel *Blasphemy* also narrates such an account of the religious hegemony of the British colonial masters and their vicious agendas. The story of the white-man religious hegemony runs dramatically. It is said that a family of native settlers occupied a little section of land in the area. Among the family member, one of the sons was a *malang* who retired to solitude and devoted himself to *deen*. When the villagers began to assemble around him under the banyan tree, his brothers called him a lunatic and discarded him. Homeless, he wandered around, until one day he climbed into the mountains and vanished. A decade later, his followers brought his dead body back to his family with a thousand narratives of miracles attached to his name.

During the same era, the British rule was also going through its infantile stage. The foreigners faced persistent problems with the obstinate natured natives whose simple minds "dared to take on powerful foreign rulers" (Durrani 86), but wholeheartedly received the "excesses of their local masters" (Durrani 86). The landowners cashed in on their character and used the underprivileged natives to blackmail the foreigners. Obtaining huge amounts and favors for themselves, they pledged on their children that they had nothing to do with the maneuverings and they will try to pacify disobedient masses.

Therefore, when white-man eyes fell upon Babaji's humble grave humming with stories of miracles, it struck them that they could "control the area through the magnetic appeal of a shrine" (Durrani 87). The British, who were always in search of local loyal allies, believed that those whom they lift from lower strata of the society to elite class would remain forever grateful.

Hence, the British decided to consult Babaji's brother and put forward the idea of expanding the area by building a graceful shrine. After a successful bargain, "the little mound of earth was rebuilt in marble, and enclosed in a circular room decorated with painted tiles. Tall green and gold minarets appeared on the roof to attract people from far away. Adjoining it, a mosque was constructed. Outside it, food was cooked in huge cauldrons to lure the hungry." (Durrani 87)

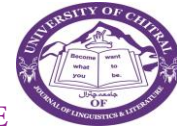
In addition, the British bestowed sainthood to the son of Babji's late brother, the one who had thrown Babaji out of his home and usurped his share of land. Distinguished gentry from across the country was invited to an eyewitness "the crowning of the boy who now wore a long beard and even longer hair. A turban, said to belong to Babaji, was brought out of a trunk and wound around his head. The piety and effort that gave Babaji spiritual power were said to descend into



his heir's body from the touch of the *pug*” (Durrani 87). The incentive for Babji's devoutness to Allah became his gratis. Local people were appointed to chant *Allahu Allahu*. The *dastarbandi* appeared to be a great carnival. Thousands of currency notes dropped into the moneybox. At the end of the ceremony, the “key to the shrine was handed over to the *pir*, and the peoples' fates were sealed.” (Durrani 87)

Nonetheless, the question here arises as to why these cultural hegemonic stances were important for the British colonial masters when they were equipped with the most advanced weapons and had great administrative control over the region. The answer can be construed from the statement that “hegemony is important because the capacity to influence the thought of the colonized is by far the most sustained and potent operation of imperial power in colonized regions.” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 107) With their might and material strength, the British had realized, that they cannot control the masses for a longer time; therefore, they had to devise and implement other ways that promised long-lasting control of the occupied territories.

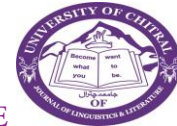
Furthermore, the role of financial interests in hegemonic designs was also a motivating force for the imperialist forces. The colonizer for its existence requires financial support to address its military and administrative needs. Other than the exploitation of natural resources, proxy trade, and brutal taxes on the natives, the colonial masters were always in search of devising new ways of financial gains from the masses. In doing so, they used cultural hegemonic enterprises to gain control of the finances left with the poor colonized masses. In this regard, Gündoğan asserts that hegemony demands the “transcendence of economic-corporate interests of the ruling group and has to assume the interests and tendencies of the allied elements” (52). Therefore, the alliance of the British colonizers and the local *pirs* served the colonizer's purpose perfectly. The colonizer not only gained administrative benefits from the politics-of-shrines but also received extraordinary financial prosperity. Gündoğan rightly points out that “hegemony is not only an ethic-politic phenomenon but also an economic one. Its foundations underlie the function of a ruling group in key areas of the economy.” (52) Durrani also exposes these covert agendas of the British patronization of the shrines in the following words: “The British ruled over a complacent people and the Shrine became a prosperous business. When Pir Sain, the second, died, his heir was better equipped because he was trained for the profession.” (Durrani 88) These lines from the novel explicitly portray the hegemonic agenda of the British colonial master behind their support of the local *pirs* for monetary benefits. Durrani exposes the British's economic interests in the region by reflecting upon the manipulation of the ideological bases of the masses through hegemonic designs. On the other hand, because the colonizer could not achieve economic prosperity through active indulgence in warfare against the natives, therefore, they had to gain the consent of the masses, which could only be achieved through cultural hegemony in general and religious hegemony in particular.



Furthermore, Araoye points out, “the internal weaknesses of the state make it perpetually vulnerable to be used as an instrument of the interests of elite state actors.” (18) This is very much true about the state of affairs in the subcontinent, particularly in Muslim communities. After the war of independence of 1857, British and Muslim relations went under severe changes. The British imperial masters had realized that Muslims of the subcontinent are a potent threat to their rule, as compared to Hindu. Therefore, they decided to crush every sort of struggle from Muslim communities. For this purpose, they devised many plans, and among them, religious hegemony was the most effective. The British colonizer knew that Muslims are divided into various sects, so it was easy for them to manipulate their hegemonic models in Muslim communities. Muslim divisions in different sects gave them the confidence to exercise stringent policies regarding their religious practices. The internal weakness of Muslim communities made them vulnerable to hegemonic exploitation. Therefore, they perpetuated patronization of religious seminaries and shrines to widen the religious division. Hence, to perpetuate these hegemonic designs, the British colonial masters required services of local allies. In the case of Muslim communities, the so-called *pirs* became their allies, and further strengthened their cause of dominance in the subcontinent. “These allies have oftentimes already been put in place by the colonial force or have already been well entrenched as in the case of a religious idea.” (Araoye 18)

Durrani reveals this wickedness in *Blasphemy* and states, “the British had found the code that undid the native mind. If a head rose, the *pir* rolled it off. Babaji was used as a prostitute.” (Durrani 88) The British colonizer cunningly used the *pirs* to gain their objectives and cheated the Muslim communities in the name of religion. The colonizer had realized that they could not suppress the Muslim communities for a longer time; therefore, they had to devise alternative means of subjugation of the natives. For this purpose, they used religion. Religion provided them the most easily available and long-lasting means to suppress the natives. The natives, partly because of their lack of religious knowledge and partly because of their religious fundamentalism, easily succumbed into the colonizer’s religious hegemonic snares. Other than that, some opportunist also saw their prosperity in these hegemonic designs. Although they were actively involved in the hegemonic scheme of the colonizer, they lack the ability to judge the seriousness of the issue from the colonized perspective. For them, their material progress was important as compared to religious duties. Therefore, it was no surprise that “a family of pimps sold him (Babaji) on British license for ninety years, while the simple people believed them to be blessed by Allah. (Durrani 88)

The story of another *Pir* in *Blasphemy*, who also received patronage from the British rulers, is equally interesting. Dai, a maidservant at Pir Sain’s home narrates the story. According to her, one day, the British rulers visited a hereditary *pir* who had the power of a god. Security was tight, armed guards were placed at a distance of six feet on the roof of the fort. The foreigners



needed to witness the *pir*'s supremacy before bequeathing favors upon him. To exhibit 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. Seeing the whole event the British acknowledged his might and bestowed upon him showers of favors. Hence, 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 61) These patronages were not only undertaken to evidence the spiritual powers of the *pir*, rather they were the manifestation of his authority over his subjects. The British only wanted to weigh the influence of the *pir* over his people, so that they pay him according to the circumference of his command to keep people subject to the British rule and kill any rebellion against the British raj.

Furthermore, by patronizing the *pirs*, the British raj has created a comprador class. A comprador class, according to Fanon, is a class of the elites of a society, "who exchanged roles with the white colonial dominating class without engaging in any radical restructuring of society." (BGH 91) This comprador class of *pirs* has established an alliance, who not only controlled the beliefs and fate of people in the name of religion, but they had control over the political system of the country as well. They exert their influence on the national policies because "the whole country is divided among the *pirs* who co-operate to strengthen and support each other's candidates." (Durrani 63) Therefore, when one *pir* pays a visit to another *pir* it seems as if "a god walked out to receive another god." (Durrani 64) Not only they had developed shared interests, but their ways of treatment of their subject were also the same. Among themselves, they had made a league in which they protected and supported each other. They respected each other and "none threatened the other, none was threatened. Each recognized the other as a pillar of the same system. Each was clear that its preservation and strength lay in mutual respect and reverence." (Durrani 64) This cooperation and mutual understanding gave their reign longevity and their dominance prevailed for generations after generations. They treated men and women alike. None could escape their wrath and none could raise a rebellious voice. If anyone ever tried to challenge their authority, they punished him severely, and in some cases even to death.

Furthermore, the attitude of these *pir*'s towards women was very repulsive and dehumanizing. Women were not only victims of their physical assaults, but also spiritually humiliation. "Although the British had left, we were still suffering in the hell they had created, one that did not even serve them any longer." (Durrani 89) these are the words from one of the characters of the novel. *Toti* a friend of the protagonists, when informs her about the history of the shrine, in very contemptuous words narrates the story of the miseries of women. The *pirs*, domestic allies of the colonial masters, treated women cruelly. The protagonist of the novel, Heer, herself is a victim of the brutality of the so-called *pir*.

Pir Sain enters Heer's life when she was just fifteen years old. *Pir Sain* meets her at his *astana*, where Heer's mother takes her for blessings. When *Pir Sain* sees her childish innocence, he is



mesmerized by that and a few days later sends her a marriage proposal. The proposal is unexpected and therefore takes Heer's mother by awe and she gives her consent for Heer's marriage to the Pir Sain. Being a widow and a mother of four daughters and one younger son, Heer's mother sees a prosperous future for the rest of her children in establishing family ties with a religiously distinguished family. She marries Heer off to Pir Sain with the instructions to "uphold your father's honor by showing good breeding. Always remain subservient to your husband's will." (Durrani 31) These instructions in their essence demand submissiveness and obedience in marital life. As a woman, Heer is expected to serve her husband and his family with the utmost compliance and submission to her husband's commands. With these lessons and guiding principles, Heer enters Pir Sain's life and home as his third wife, the other two being dead earlier. To her great surprise, Pir Sain's home and lifestyle are remarkably different than hers and it nurtures a fear of authority in her.

On her wedding night, she experiences the brutality of Pir Sain, and the image that she had previously developed a softhearted, caring soul mate diminishes. Heer recounts the story of her wedding night in the following words:

Stripped naked, I felt a mountain of flesh descend on me. A fisherman, hopeful of profit and safety, had set out to sea on a bright day. Suddenly, clouds thickened and collided. Black rain poured into the ocean. Thunder and lightning drove the vast expanse of water wild. Its volume and ager swelled. The noise up above was loud, the noise down below even louder. The air was solid. There was no escape." (Durrani 39)

Heer compares Pir Sain's lustful advances to animalistic appetite, which devours his prey until his hunger is satiated. The shocking experience of the wedding night further increases the fear of authority in her and she feels frightened. Then she reminisces on the preparation, the rituals, the ceremonies of the wedding, and everything appear to her as preparation of some slaughter, she believes that she has been "sacrificed to a god on earth." (Durrani 39) Heer's wedding night was just the beginning of a miserable life. With every passing day, Pir Sain's attitude grew more demanding and unsympathetic. The occasional physical punishments were becoming more severe and humiliating. Slowly and gradually, "fear of Pir Sain became ingrained somewhere deeper." (Durrani 44) Heer very soon realizes that "a woman's position always depended on a man, whether she was rich or poor did not matter. She always went from father to husband to son." (Durrani 46) She considers herself in the second stage of the paradigm. Pir Sain's unscrupulous behavior so much disappoints Heer that she is flabbergasted and considers that God has lifted her from dirt, then raised to heights and then swirled into nothingness. She feels that Pir Sain has reduced her to an insect.

Heer realizes that Pir Sain, whose ancestors were once puppets in the hands of the British colonial masters, has inherited his ancestor's traits. She believes that because his ancestors were



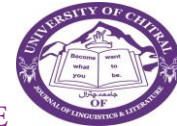
suppressed by the colonial masters, they “derived strength from suppressing others. It helped them to accept their imprisonment and was an easy occupation for the trapped.” (Durrani 51) Hence, after the British colonial master’s departure, they had become the “comprador” class, inherited their master’s brutal techniques and practiced it on the masses and kept them enslaved. This pirs not only indulge in the physical assaults of their subjects but also indulges in incest. The novel *Blasphemy* provides scores of instances where Durrani portrays characters like Heer’s brother-in-law and his daughter’s Messni sexual relationship is a blatant example of incest. Pir Sain himself tried to molest his elder daughter, Guppi, who was just twelve years at that time. These heinous crimes were too frequent in Pir Sain’s *haveli*. To Heer, her husband was her son’s murderer. He was also her daughter’s molester. “A parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer” compelling her to sin every night. “He was Bhai’s destroyer, Amma Sain’s tormentor, Ma’s humbler and the people’s exploiter. 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 143)

Conclusion

In light of the above-cited references, it can be well argued that the British imperial master had carefully wrought their hegemonic designs in the Muslim communities which not only helped them to rule subjects during their dominance but are still working and exercising unrestrained authority over masses. The religious hegemonic scheme proved to be very successful to the colonizers, as they kill all the possible chances of any rebellion against the colonizer's authority. The British did not feel any threat, once they took the responsibility of patronization of the shrine. However, this evil did not stop at the departure of the colonial masters, rather it still prevalent in society and destroying a large number of masses.

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