

A Literary Depiction of Honor Killing

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Abstract Women are considered to be the vessel for retaining the family's honor. They are tortured and killed to ensure that the honor is retained. Through this paper I would like to highlight the various issues pertaining to this concept of "honor killing" which is many a times disguised as "honor suicide" by the family involved in this heinous work. Literature as a platform for evoking mass awareness will again help in popularizing this issue by a detailed study of texts like *Burned Alive* by Souad, *Betrayed* by Latifa Ali and Richard Shears and *In The Name of Honor* by Mukhtar Mai. That honor killing is not just a statistical data but entails a much grave ethos with it will be highlighted in this paper. Another important aspect of this paper is to draw attention to these autobiographies for raising social consciousness among the masses including the role played by patriarchy and the extent to which Islam is actually responsible for it, if at all. A detailed peek into the genesis and palliative means of honor killing will also be undertaken.

Keywords women; honor killing; honor suicide; autobiographies; Patriarchy; Islam; social consciousness.

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Introduction

A loving father or a doting brother helping the little girl to take her first steps, dandling her on their knee, making her laugh with silly jokes and tricks and so on is a common sight that we all are accustomed to seeing. But imagine this same loving father or the doting brother suddenly change their affection towards the girl and during one nightmarish reality, advance towards the girl with a gun, knife, rope or even petrol to put an end to her life. Imagine the constant fear with which the girl lives her life. Her murderer is not somebody unknown to her but someone whom she has known all her life, one with whom she is connected emotionally. Her crime does not need to be proved. It can be based on an assumed love affair that she can even be killed. The justification given by her murderers is “HONOR.” For the sake of retaining the honor of the family, she loses her life.

Is honor then so superficial that it gets tainted if a girl simply gazes at a boy or talks to him? Is it only the girl’s sole responsibility of retaining the honor of the family? What about murder then? Isn’t murder a more heinous crime than a simple innocent look at somebody of the opposite sex? What about domestic violence that a girl is regularly subjected to? Or has patriarchy so blinded itself that every action of a girl holds her accountable to a life of extreme agony? All these are issues that need to be thought about and this paper is just an earnest effort to move us from the comfort of our existence and peek into the literature highlighting them. One thing is very clear that there is no “honor” involved in these murders, and that calling them “honor killings” denigrates the sufferer and derogates the ruthlessness of these crimes.

The narratives depict violations of human rights and confront readers with “emotional, often overwhelming, accounts of dehumanization, brutal and violent physical harm, and exploitation” (Smith and Watson 133). These incidents need a platform to be heard as “their scenes of witness entwine the narrator, the story, and the listener/reader in an ethical call to empathic identification and accountability, recognition, and oftentimes action” (Smith, and Watson 134). Schaffer and Smith in *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (2004) explain what happens when people connect through life narratives:

As people meet and tell stories, or read stories across cultures, they begin to voice, recognize, and bear witness to a diversity of values, experiences, and ways of imagining a just social world of responding to injustice, inequality, and human suffering. (Schaffer and Smith 1)

Honor Killing and Patriarchy

I am a girl. A girl must walk fast, head down, as if counting the number of steps she's taking. She may never stray from her path or look up, for if a man catches her eye, the whole village labels her a *charmuta*. If a married neighbor woman, or an old woman, or just anybody sees her out without her mother or her older sister, without her sheep, her bundle of hay or her load of figs, they say, "*Charmuta*." A girl must be married before she can raise her eyes and look straight ahead, or go into a shop, or pluck her eyebrows and wear jewellery. My mother was married at fourteen. If a girl is still unmarried by that age, the village begins to make fun of her. But a girl must wait her turn in the family to be married. The eldest daughter first, then the others. (Souad 9)

These are the opening lines of Souad's novel *Burned Alive*. This sums up the position of a woman in a tiny village somewhere in the West Bank. The condition of the women seems deplorable as she is held accountable for everything that happens to her. The pride of a man's honor is dependent on the women. So, the man tries his level best to keep the woman in a subservient position by asserting his authority and controlling her sexual desire as he is convinced that she has no control over her sexual passion. The authority of the man is unlimited as he is the lord of the family and asserted the male prerogative of superiority. This sense of superiority enables the man to do anything that he wants to. Souad mentions how she was badly beaten by her father even for a minor fault of picking a green tomato. Bashing the women is an everyday affair:

I shouldn't say 'I didn't have the right,' because rights do not exist in my country for women. There are customs, that's all. If your father points to a corner of the room and tells you to stay in that corner for the rest of your life, you won't move from there until you die. If your father places an olive in a plate and tells you that today that's all you'll have to eat, you only eat that olive. It is difficult to get out of this role of consenting slave. As a female you're born into it. For all of your childhood, you are taught to be obedient to

men—by father, mother, brother, and then by your husband. (Souad 79)

The same thought is highlighted by Mukhtar Mai in her memoir, *In The Name of Honor*, when she mentions:

Half the women of our country are the victims of violence.... They're either forced into marriage, or raped, or used as objects of exchange among men. It doesn't matter what the women think, because they're not supposed to think at all! They're not allowed to learn to read and write, to find out how the world around them works. That's why illiterate women cannot defend themselves: they know nothing about their rights, and words are put into their mouths to sabotage their revolt. (Mai 46)

This highlights the subservient position of women in a place that is ruled by patriarchy. The hypocrisy of the society comes to the forefront when on the one hand women are considered to be fragile creatures requiring protection while on the other, they are deemed as evil creatures from whom the society needs to be protected. Mukhtar Mai has denigrated this strongly:

What is more serious is that women are the ones exchanged as merchandise to help resolve conflicts and exact punishment. And the punishment is always the same. When sexuality is taboo, when a man's honor in Pakistani society is centered in women, the only solution he can find to settle all scores is compulsory marriage or rape. (Mai 109)

Women are considered the “repository of family honor” (Peratis 5). Patriarchal tribal tradition, thus, puts the onus on the man to protect and control the woman. If he fails to do so, his honor is at stake and can only be redeemed by the death of the woman, a self-administered justice that he believes in. This is termed as “honor killing” where a woman is put to death by a close male family member for any real or assumed “immoral or shameful” acts (Baker 164-184). She might be killed if she does not bleed on her wedding night, if she is spotted talking with an unrelated man behind a fence, or if she is seen leaving a stranger's car. “A woman can be targeted by her family for a variety of reasons, including: refusing to enter in to an arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual assault, seeking a divorce—even from an abusive husband or committing adultery” (Rout 18). Sexual assault or rape is also considered to be the fault of the woman. As Amnesty International statement notes:

The regime of honor is unforgiving: women on whom suspicion has fallen are not given an opportunity to defend themselves, and family members have no socially acceptable alternative but to remove the stain on their honor by attacking the woman. (Shora 287)

There is an Arabic expression which says, “A man’s honor lies between the legs of a woman” (Hauser 146). Even Sharif Kanaana, professor of anthropology at Birzeit University states that:

What the men of the family, clan, or tribe seek control of in a patrilineal society is reproductive power. Women for the tribe were considered a factory for making men. The honor killing is not a means to control sexual power or behavior. What’s behind it is the issue of fertility, or reproductive power. (Moghissi 126)

Kandiyoti claims that in an Islamic society, femininity is a position that is already assigned but masculinity is something that needs to be achieved and retained. Any misbehavior on the part of the woman can tarnish their manliness. A man’s manhood is at stake if he is not able to rectify this error. Hence, he resorts to violence to boost his hurt ego and once again assert his superiority using his physical prowess. This kind of exposition of honor is rooted in the concept of objectifying women as the honor of the family is bestowed on her body. Significantly, manliness and shame are complementary qualities in relation to honor. The women, thus, must have shame if the manliness of the men is not to be dishonored. Violence for the sake of honor occurs in patriarchal societies where priority is given to the man and family. As Fadia Faqir articulates, “The use of violence to maintain privilege is not a neoteric phenomenon, rather it is historically entrenched, and has turned gradually into the systemic and global destruction of women, with the institutionalization of patriarchy over the centuries” (Faqir 65-82). Violence against women has become customary by involving family, society, culture and religion. It has “stemmed from the patriarchal and patrilineal society’s interest in maintaining strict control over designated familial power structures” (Stacy 42). Honor crimes are collectively carried out as it is planned by several family members. The murderer commits the murder primarily because he has been asked to do so. They are often public, an aspect “integral to their social functions, which include influencing the conduct of other women” (United Nations 33). Souad mentions:

Assad was violent like my father. He was a murderer, but in my village that word has no meaning when a woman is killed. It is the duty of the brother, the brother-in-law or the uncle to preserve the family's honor. If the father or mother says to her son, "Your sister has sinned, you must kill her," he does it for the sake of honor and because it is the law. (Souad 48)

Tradition becomes the law. Historically, in some Arab countries under Ottoman rule, a killer would "sprinkle his victim's blood on his clothes and parade through the streets displaying the bloody murder weapon... to increase his honor, thereby attracting community respect rather than condemnation for taking a life" (Kressel 143). Hence, many people do not even recognise that it is a crime. Women, as well, feel that it is a norm and a regular part of family life. Souad mentions:

We accept beating as natural. No thought of rebellion occurs to us. We know how to cry, hide, lie if necessary to avoid the stick, but to rebel? Never. This is because there is no other place for us to live than in the house of our father or husband. Living alone is inconceivable. (Souad 91)

Even Kate Millet persuasively has opined the same notion when she mentions this vicious cycle:

We are not accustomed to associate patriarchy with force. So perfect is its system of socialization, so complete the general assent to its values, so long and so universally has it prevailed in human society, that it scarcely seems to require violent implementation ... and yet ... control in patriarchal societies would be imperfect, even inoperable, unless it had the rule of force to rely upon, both in emergencies and as a never-present instrument of intimidation. (Millet 44-45)

Victims of honor killing are buried alive, burned, shot, strangulated, transpierced, and even stoned to death. The UN has estimated that 5,000 women are murdered by family members each year in "honor killings" but according to women's advocacy groups the figure is much higher and could be around 20,000, four times more. Almost a thousand honor killings occur every year in Pakistan alone. This is primarily because there is a huge impediment involving the reporting of these crimes and therefore official statistics are grossly underreported. Latifa Ali narrates

similar incidents:

Three teenage girls who tried to defy centuries-old traditions by announcing they intended to marry men of their choice were driven into a remote area of Baluchistan and gunned down. While they were not fatally shot, they were thrown, bleeding, into a ditch and then buried alive. Two elderly women who tried to rescue them met with the same fate.

Shortly after reports of that appalling incident reached the West came another tragic story from Pakistan. A girl forced into marriage at the age of nine to a man aged 45, went to court in the Punjabi city of Sahiwal to seek-and win-an annulment. She was now aged 17 and had spent eight years of her childhood as an enslaved wife and mother. As she left the court building she was surrounded by a group of men employed by her parents and shot dead. (Ali 256)

Latifa Ali in her autobiography, *Betrayed*, has mentioned the incident of her cousin who was killed by her own father and husband by pouring gasoline over her and burning her alive. The reality of her husband being into an adulterous relationship was never brought forth but the fact that she talked to men was a crime as it deemed her to be an “easy woman.” Honor killing seemed to be a never-ending trend as she mentions the family history of the murdered cousin:

Her grandmother and her mother had been killed for the same reasons. Reputation. Family pride. Honor. Her crime was that she had stopped to talk to a group of men as she went to a well to fetch water. Idle gossip, rumour-and your life could be destroyed. (Ali 37)

Notwithstanding the issues of class, racial or religious groups, women have always been deemed as the property of the males. The fate of the property is decided by the owner. This has in turn rated women as a commodity meant for the purpose of transactions:

Whatever the pretext- divorce, supposed adultery, or a settling of accounts among men-women pay the heaviest price. They may be given as compensation for an offense or raped as a form of reprisal by their husbands' enemies. Sometimes, all it takes is for two men to quarrel about something, and one of them will take revenge on the other's wife. The common practice

in our villages is for men to take justice into their own hands, invoking the principle of “an eye for an eye.” It is always a question of honor, and they may do as they please: cut off a woman’s nose, burn a sister, rape a neighbor’s wife. (Mai 66)

As Puri observes that the three statuses open for women are: that of some man’s virgin daughter; another man’s pious wife; and the self-sacrificing mother of sons. Women learn that any deviation from rules can trigger violence against them. Mukhtar Mai has also opined the same:

A woman here has nothing solid to stand on. When she lives with her parents, she does what they want. Once she has joined her husband’s household, she follows his orders. When her children are grown, her sons take over, and she belongs to them in the same way. (Mai 78)

This is the kind of “normal” lifestyle that society implants into the psyche of the people to veil their idiosyncratic notion of “honor.” Souad, thus, mentions:

Many girls are beaten, mistreated, strangled, burned, killed. It’s normal for us. My mother wanted to poison me to “finish” my brother-in-law’s work, and for her this was a normal part of her world. That’s what normal life is for women there. You’re beaten up, it’s normal, you’re burned, it’s normal, you’re mistreated, it’s normal. The cow and the sheep as, my father used to say, are worth more than the women. If you don’t want to die, you’d better keep quiet, obey, grovel, be a virgin when you’re married, and bear sons....If I had lived there, I would have become “normal” like my mother, who suffocated her own children. Maybe I would have killed my daughters. I might have let one burn to death. (Souad 285)

Any kind of sexual assault on women like rape or incest is the fault of the woman and the typical patriarchal society does not discredit men for violating the honor of the woman. It is nothing but the re-victimization of the victim. Women conform to the patriarchal rules probably because the authority exerted by men requires the complete submission of women. Therefore, the gang rape of Mukhtar Mai is a clear example of what was stated as “honor justice.” Her autobiography, *In The Name of Honor*, foregrounds a situation of a woman of the peasant Gujar caste in the village of Meerwala. She was gang raped by a powerful local clan known as

the Mastoi. Her rape was primarily a decision taken by the councillors of the Jirga as a punishment for certain indiscretions that were rumoured to be committed by her brother. The reason that was given by her father for selecting her among her other sisters was strange : “Your husband has granted you a divorce, you have no children, you teach the Koran. You are a respectable woman” (Mai 2).

The raped woman becomes a living corpse, a final nail in the already doomed existence that she was subjected to in the hands of the society:

I, Mukhtaran Bibi, eldest daughter of my father, Ghulam Farid Jat, lose all consciousness of myself, but I will never forget the faces of those animals. For them, a woman is simply an object of possession, honor, or revenge. They marry or rape them according to their conception of tribal pride. They know that a woman humiliated in that way has no other recourse except suicide. They don't even need to use their weapons. Rape kills her. Rape is the ultimate weapon: it shames the other clan forever. (Mai 10)

As Jasam observes, women's compliance and consent are the basis of classic patriarchies. Yasmeen Hassan, author of *The Haven Becomes Hell: A Study of Domestic Violence in Pakistan*, has highlighted the same opinion: “The concepts of women as property and honor are so deeply entrenched in the social, political and economic fabric of Pakistan that the government, for the most part, ignores the daily occurrences of women being killed and maimed by their families” (Hassan 72). Even Amy Logan, who has spent ten years researching about honor killing and has authored a novel titled *The Seven Perfumes of Sacrifice*, is of the opinion that honor violence is first and foremost about cultures who view and treat women as property or inferior. This is a human rights issue—women's rights are human rights. Culture is no excuse for abuse. It's time for all communities in which honor violence occurs, regardless of religion, to start having an honest conversation about it.

The onus of honor killing is not only limited to the men of the patriarchal society. The culpability of the women in this society cannot be negated. The patriarchal society has trained a woman to assess stuffs from a man's perspective. According to a study conducted by Glazer and Abu-Ras, women also play indirect role in promotion of honor killing as they gossip and cast aspersion on the character of the victims which instigate relatives of the victims who resort to killing the victims to redeem the honor of the family. This is a way by which violence against women has been endorsed by both men and women for sustaining the social order in accordance with the laws laid down by patriarchy. Sangari also opines that women

play a dominant role in using this so-called corrective measure as their multilayered identities are rooted in class, caste, and familial notions of status. By accepting these ideologies, the women define their position in society, try to justify their sense of self-worth and ensure economic benefits as they are dependent on the men in their family. Therefore, these rules have set older women against young, rich women against poor, and women associated with grooms against women related to brides. Souad in her autobiography, *Burned Alive*, mentions how her mother had been an accomplice in the murder of her elder sister, Hanan, by her elder brother, Assad. She narrates the incident thus:

When my parents came home, my mother spoke to Assad. I saw her crying, but I know now she was just pretending: I've come to understand how things happen in my land. I know why they kill girls and how it happens. It is decided at a family meeting and on the fatal day the parents are never present. Only the one who has been chosen to do the killing is with the intended victim. My mother wasn't really crying. She knew why my brother had strangled my sister. If not, why had she gone out that day with my father and Noura? (Souad 46)

In a similar manner was Souad's murder planned by her family, but here the murder was commissioned to her brother-in-law, Hussein. This kind of culture prioritizes honor above the gift of life. Souad's crime was that she had got into a sexual liaison with a man and had got pregnant.

In my country, a man who has taken a girl's virginity is not guilty, she was willing. And, even worse, she asked for it, provoked the man because she was a whore without honor. I had no defense. My naïveté, my love for him, his promise of marriage, even his first request to my father, nothing counts for anything. In our culture, a man who has self-respect doesn't marry the girl he has deflowered. (Souad 150)

Girls usually know that it's important for them to be a virgin for their future husbands as a blood-stained handkerchief would enhance the pride and prestige of the groom and his family. This tradition has continued for many generations without even recognising that many virgins too do not bleed on their first night. Marital bliss is dependent on the blood-stained handkerchief. Her purity and efficiency as a capable wife depend on this petty thing otherwise she has to live with the constant fear of being thrown out of her in-laws' house or usurped by a second wife. Latifa

Ali narrates how she was fooled into a pre-marital sexual encounter with her betrothed who later had denounced her:

How skilfully Mikael had taken advantage of me. There was no doubt in my mind that he had not been a virgin. He knew exactly what he was doing. But the male would not be blamed. In Kurdish society I was to learn, it was the woman who would be seen to have done wrong by leading him on. Sex before marriage was haram (totally forbidden) and it was always the woman who was the sinner. (Ali 35)

A similar incident had happened to a girl named Pela. Nobody had bothered to hear her stance: “She was inspected after her death and found to have been killed needlessly. She was still a virgin. Even suspicion was enough to bring about her “honor killing.” What a misnomer such deaths were. They were murder, as plain as that” (Ali 242). Only by questioning and confronting these patriarchal mentalities can susceptibility of women to this type of violence be reduced. But what can be seen instead is a rising trend in a different form of societal rectification that is termed as “honor suicide.” In this process the families force the girls to commit suicide to restore their family honor and avoiding the danger of sending the male relative to jail. This also helps them to conform to the secular legal code and maintain tradition as well. In Turkey, with a change in the penal code where perpetrators of honor killings are given life sentences, families have opted for an alternative path of “forcing their daughters to commit suicide” or killing them “and disguising the deaths as suicides” (Bilefsky). More than half of the honor killings of women that came to the attention of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women were made to look like suicides by self-immolation.

Jean Sasson has mentioned that if any member of a family is accidentally killed, the concerned family will receive “blood money.” “In Saudi, presently, the payment can be anywhere between 120,000 to 300,000 Saudi riyals (\$45,000-80,000) but it automatically becomes half if the person killed is a woman. Besides this the Shari’a states that a murder can be settled by a succession of killings out of vengeance that might keep continuing for generations. Or the victim’s family might even murder the murderer” (Sasson 284). Thus, highlighting how petty the worth of a person’s life is. Vengeance is justified by the Shari’a, therefore, honor killing becomes a trivial everyday issue. Recknagel has opined that “in countries where they continue to have mitigating circumstances or offenses that allow for the offenders to be pardoned, there is no deterrent and it sends a message to society that

it is ok to kill the women of their families if they breach their honor” (Recknagel).

Ruthlessness of mankind reaches a peak when these murders take place. Latifa Ali’s cousin Etab was killed based on a specious rumour of having an affair in the absence of her husband. The manner of her death brings shudders to the ones who hear it: “Like a cave woman, she was dragged by her hair from the vehicle by her father and petrol was poured over her as she knelt in fear. Her father struck a match and threw it on her and as her screams rang out, he bought out a gun and fired a number of bullets into her body” (Ali 183).

The list of this kind of incidents is endless. It’s a woe that despite being such a major issue, awareness is still so little. Hussein believes the reason why these killings have received little to no attention lies behind the fact that “they are all too often disguised as a traditional or cultural practice which has to be respected and accepted by everyone” (Hussein 22). Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* (2004) tries to comprehend “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death” (xiv-xv). A girl who is born in such a society is not considered human and so it becomes convenient to efface her. As Butler puts it: “there have been no lives, and no losses; there has been no common bodily condition” (Butler 36), and therefore, she is not counted as a human. When a life is not grievable because it is not human, it becomes “already the unburied, if not the unburiable” (Butler 34).

Honor Killing and Islam

Matthew A. Goldstein has noted that honor killings were encouraged in ancient Rome, where male family members who did not take action against the female adulterers in their families were “actively persecuted.” Roman law also made it permissible for a husband to kill his wife if he caught her in adultery, but not vice versa. (Goldstein 28-37). Latifa Ali mentions:

If adultery by the wife was concerned it could be quickly settled with a bullet in her head and if it was adultery by the husband and he wanted to start a new life with another woman, the deserted wife’s family would have to receive compensation. That way, any shame would be “bought off.” Thus, emphasizing the concept of considering the woman as a property. (Ali 70)

In Europe, the practice of honor killing started during medieval period. In the Arab countries, brutal murder of women was common during early days of ignorance. In Pakistan, it is believed that the Arab settlers brought the tradition of burying girl child.

There is a prevalent opinion that honor killings are sanctioned by Islam. Aysan Sev'er and Gokçeçiçek Yurdukul report in their research that family members of victims of honor killings “and the actual killers invoke a cultural understanding of honor rather than a religious one” when justifying honor killings and conclude that “any connection between Islam and this heinous crime is by no means clear or direct” (Sev'er & Yurdukul 978). Culture and religion have become so synonymously intertwined that many cultural acts are wrongly interpreted to be religious. If honor killing is solely an Islamic practice then how come it is practiced by people following other religions as well. The phenomenon is in any case a global one. According to Stephanie Nebehay, such killings “have been reported in Bangladesh, Britain, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Pakistan, Morocco, Sweden, Turkey and Uganda” (Nebehay). Afghanistan, where the practice is condoned under the rule of the fundamentalist Taliban movement, can be added to the list, along with Iraq and Iran. “If you go to an Afghan village and ask a woman who has not been to school and has no education about her Islamic rights, she would probably tell you about all the traditional rules that she has followed and that her mother, her grandmother and aunties have always followed. Information about Islamic rights and the law of the country is very limited” (Kargar 184). This is the basic reason behind considering honor killing as Islamic as people are not aware of their rights.

The ambiguity is primarily created by the imams who consider themselves as the supreme interpreter of the Qur'an. Although not Islamic, yet we find a tacit acceptance of honor killing in the Muslim world and by Islamic clerics. Sheikh 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Khayyat, a former Jordanian minister of religious affairs (*awqaf*), issued a *fatwa* (Islamic religious ruling) stating that sharia does not grant a wife the right to murder her husband if he is into an adulterous relationship. This, as Khayyat explained, is not an offence against the family's honor but against the couple's marital life, and the utmost thing that the wife can do is to file for divorce. Another Jordanian law-maker, 'Abd al-Baqi Qammu, explained: “Whether we like it or not, women are not equal to men in Islam. Adulterous women are much worse than adulterous men, because women determine the lineage” (Feldner 41-50).

Rand Abdel-Qadar was killed by her father in Basra, Iraq, when she was seventeen years old. She was ostensibly thought to have fallen in love with a British soldier who was deployed there. The local officials opined that, “Not much can be done when we have an honor killing case. You are in a Muslim society and women should live under religious laws” (Mojab 138). Leyla Pervizat states that religious leaders unequivocally “denounce the practice” of honor killings and quotes a

conservative Muslim tribal leader saying, “This is honor, what has that got to do with the Qur’an?” however this imam continued with the statement that “men’s honor comes before the [Qur’an]” (Mojab 138).

The Qur’an says: “Husbands should take good care of their wives, with [the bounties] God has given to some more than others and with what they spend out of their own money. Righteous wives are devout and guard what God would have them guard in their husbands’ absence. If you fear high handedness from your wives, remind them [of the teachings of God], then ignore them when you go to bed, then hit them...” (Qur’an 4:34.).

Once it was told that women have become emboldened towards their husbands the prophet Muhammad gave permission to beat them. On Egyptian television during a 2010 talk show, a Muslim cleric, Sa’d Arafat, reviewed the rules for beating one’s wife. He began by saying, “Allah honored wives by installing the punishment of beating” (Arafat).

Honor killings were practiced much before Islam and are not consistent with the Qur’an. Many people follow their religious beliefs based on the hadith and numerous commentaries which involved the rapid Islamisation of a variety of different populations whose “cultures, customs, and institutions” were integrated into Islamic cultural and religious practices (Ahmed 81). Some of these customs, such as a strongly patriarchal social structure and honor-based value system, became so interwoven with Islamic religious traditions that they are frequently viewed as central elements of Islam despite the fact that they were not established in the Qur’an (Ahmed 86). Many Muslims believe men are favored over women in Islam and explicitly equate “God with husbands” to the extent that they believe “ingratitude to a husband is like ingratitude to God” (Barlas 108). From this premise, it is clear why many Muslims attach religious significance to male honor and consider women who disobey their husbands or fathers to have committed a religious as well as social crime. Honor killings are thus considered religiously sanctioned in traditional communities because a woman who had damaged her family’s honor is also guilty of dishonoring God. But the truth largely remains what has been stated by Sheikh Atiyyah Saqr, former head of the al-Azhar University Fatwa Committee:

Like all other religions, Islam strictly prohibits murder and killing without legal justification. Allah, Most High, says, “Whoso slayeth a believer of set purpose, his reward is Hell for ever. Allah is wroth against him and He hath cursed him and prepared for him an awful doom.” (An-Nisa’: 93) The so-called “honor killing” is based on ignorance and disregard of morals and laws, which cannot

be abolished except by disciplinary punishments. (Krosalak)

Latifa Ali has stated: “How wrong it had been, not only to kill one so young and lovely, but to take a life when the Koran makes it clear that it is wrong to kill something we have not created. No-one can show themselves to be greater than God, the Muslim Holy Book teaches” (Ali 37).

Resurrection of the Dead

So, are anger and retribution emotions exclusively meant for men? What should be thought about is the issue that if men consider women to be the vessel retaining their honor then why do they try to kill or rape their honor? What are the constraints in the path of a woman that forbids her to avenge her wrong? “I could buy a gun myself, or some acid that I could throw into their eyes to blind them. I could ... but I am only a woman, and we have no money. We haven’t the right to have any! Men have the monopoly on vengeance, which passes through violence inflicted upon women” (Mai 19).

After Souad’s horrendous experience she preferred death over her suffering and humiliation. Her situation accentuates the torture meted out to women because of the simple reason that they are women. The site of violence is the body of the woman. Girls like Souad can attain salvation when humanitarian organisations take extraordinary pains to assist them. In case of Souad, Jacqueline acted as her messiah. She represented an organisation called Terre des Hommes, directed by Edmond Kaiser. Their work is done in collaboration with the International Red Cross and other organisations. Jacqueline had a really hard time in convincing the doctor to help her shift Souad to a better hospital. But things could not proceed without the permission of her family who wanted her dead. She persuaded her family with the lie that Souad was about to die and it was in the best of their interest if she died in a different place far away from her family. Thus, after a lot of legal hassles and a few stops here and there, Souad attained liberation in Geneva, Switzerland.

In Geneva, after her nursing, Jacqueline helped her to be adopted by her foster parents. With the passing of years, she got married and had kids. Her life, like her body, was cured. But what remained behind were the eternal scars like her irreparable memory of the incident that had led to those scars, not to forget the trauma as well. She is now working with an organisation called Surgir that works internationally to help women who are victims of various kinds of atrocities. The progress might be slow but steady. Her efforts and victory can be summed up in the following lines:

Little by little, the authorities are recognizing these acts as criminal. Statistics are published in the reports of the Human Rights Commission in Pakistan.... In recent years, authorities like the late King Hussein of Jordan and the late King Hassan of Morocco have declared themselves openly against honor crimes, which they have said “are not crimes of honor but of dishonor.” (Souad 299)

Latifa Ali’s liberators were the American soldiers who were posted in Dohuk, Iraq. They took the onus of her relocation by devising arrangements with the Australian Embassy, making them understand her situation. The Australian Embassy then provided her with the emergency travel documents as her original ones were confiscated by her mother. Despite various obstacles created by many officials, she was finally able to be on her way home to Sydney, after 1093 days. Their good work confirms our lost faith in humanity.

Mukhtar Mai opts for the legal institution to seek justice for the wrong administered to her. But it required a great determination to realise that one had to fight for justice against all odds. The orthodox conviction is that the woman who has been shamed should either commit suicide or bury herself alive. But Mukhtar Mai decided to confront: “So, in order to fight, it seems that I must lose everything: my reputation, my honor, everything that was once my life. But that’s not important. I want justice” (Mai 50).

The local police officers try their level best by threatening Mukhtar and putting words into her mouth to concoct a different story to save the influential accused men. Luckily for her, the judge and the press had helped her achieve vindication by sentencing the accused to death penalty. But luck doesn’t favour a woman and on 3 March 2005 the verdict of the Lahore High Court released five of the accused and sentenced one to life imprisonment. With the aid of various organisations, she travels abroad to spread awareness regarding the issues related to the violence that is meted out to women. On 15 June 2005, Parvez Musharraf, the then prime minister of Pakistan, put her name on the Exit-Control List to bar her from leaving the country. On 21 April 2011, the Supreme Court also voiced the Lahore High Court’s judgment. Hina Jilani, one of the founders of AGHS Legal Aid Cell, argues cases in the supreme courts in both Lahore and Islamabad, blames the president for protecting and influencing criminal investigations against the accused. According to her: “If the condition of women is improving a little, that doesn’t have anything to do with the authorities. Any progress is due in large measure to civil society and to organizations supporting women’s rights. Such people have risked their lives to

attain their goals! For years, we have been the targets of serious threats and constant pressure” (Mai 140).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I do strongly believe that these novels can change the cultural values and traditions in societies that give so much of importance to honor-based crimes. The modern novel is viewed as “well suited to the exploration of social ideas and social protest”. (Johnson and Johnson vii) So, the phoenix will surely rise again from its own pyre. Similarly, the fire used to burn the woman will purge the woman of all the sins that she has committed. Her sins like her skin will melt down and there will be a new aura in her demeanor. The aura will not be to please others, but it will be the one that will give her a new identity that is solely her own and is not dependent on any man in her life. Her sins of being a naïve, uneducated, agreeable, docile lady will also be burned off. What fills her now is outrage and the desire to have justice, the virulence against patriarchy. “Before, I had lived in absolute submission; now, my rebellion will be equally relentless” (Mai 31).

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