

# Shakespearean Theatrical Works in Relation to Contemporary Social Practices of Honour-Based Violence

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**Abstract** In his comedies as well as tragedies, Shakespeare confronts the themes of honour and shame, male social standing, female chastity and subordination of women, questioning the prevailing patriarchal attitudes of his time, which victimise both men and women. This article is intended to make a comparative analysis of honour-related crime as Shakespeare alludes to again and again in his dramatic works and as they appear today in honour-centred societies, the Middle Eastern cultures in particular, where honour killings still hold a notable weight. Bringing together Shakespearean examples and its contemporary extensions as practices by traditional cultures, the study reveals that honour-related violence, whether in Shakespeare's time or societies today, East and West, has been an on-going issue, and neither the Renaissance as an age of great discoveries nor technological advances of the twenty first century managed to wipe out this practice. The analysis demonstrates that honour-related violence which occupies a significant space in Shakespeare's texts also serves the richness and diversity of his dramatic oeuvre, and therefore this particular subject is worth investigating further from broader historical contexts and contemporary perspectives.

**Key words** Shakespeare; honour killing; patriarchy; feudal societies; the Middle East; Turkey

Oh Fate, take not away thy heavy hand.  
Death is the fairest cover for her shame  
That may be wished for.

*Much Ado About Nothing* (IV.i. 113-115)

Committing crime in the name of personal or family honour is an all-too-familiar

phenomenon in the contemporary world. Killing or terrorising women for their illicit sexual activities was familiar also to the Shakespearean world. The purpose of this study is to correlate Shakespearean examples of honour killing with the contemporary practices of the violence as trans-historical, trans-geographical matter of wrong patriarchal traditions and cultures rather than religion. Virtually no comprehensive analysis has been undertaken so far, which links Shakespearean texts to honour-based violence as practiced in contemporary, patriarchal communities. The present study, therefore, offers an assessment of the historical context of the crime in Shakespeare and in contemporary tribal societies as well as an evaluation of the similarities and differences of the practices of honour killing as exposed in Shakespearean theatrical works and as currently experienced in the contemporary world. Particular references to Shakespearean dramatic works will be made in order to track and explore the way these texts enlarge our understanding and the root causes of this worldwide barbaric tradition.

### **The Turkish Perspectives**

The 2007 Turkish State Theatre Company's sell-out production of *Romeo and Juliet* in the city of Van, the easternmost province of Turkey and an ethnically Kurdish region, was no exception to the fact that human dilemmas Shakespeare explores transcend specific centuries and particular civilisations. The production immediately called to mind the present day problem of so called "honour killing" which still persists as a grim reality among the feudal tribal communities in the country.<sup>1</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, the first play by Shakespeare ever staged in the province made sensational headlines in the Turkish media and newspapers alike: "The City of Van Warmly Embraces Shakespeare," "Romeo-Juliet Will Die in the City of Van." During my private conversation, one of the young actors in the production also expressed that the whole team was surprised to see the enthusiastic reception of the performance by the younger audience. In an interview, its young director, Kemal Bashar, stressed that the ethnic conflict between the feuding families in the play was overlapping with the current situation and feudal structure of the region ("Romeo-Juliet Van'da Ölecek!" 2). Critics did not even hesitate to associate directly the fictional world of *Romeo and Juliet* with the current horror stories and the fates of young Turkish or Kurdish women killed mostly by male relatives and even by their lovers in the name of family honour (Maro 2). In this context, it would not be quite accurate to say that Juliet is actually the victim of an honour killing as such, since she is not killed either by her father or her lover; she takes her own life out of despair when she sees her lover dead. However, it is important to recognise that Juliet's death is certainly caused indirectly by her father's rejection of her marriage with a man she deeply and honestly loves.

Empathizing with Juliet's reaction to Paris, particularly the young viewers of the Turkish production felt that the series of events unfolding in the play were all too familiar ones; the story of the loss of an innocent young couple for reasons of family honour, the story of a young girl forced by her family to marry a man she does not like, or the story of a father who loses her daughter as an indirect result of this loveless match. The audience admitted that they were experiencing similar kinds of unfulfilled, unrequited, illicit love affairs often obstructed by the "Turkish-Kurdish divide" and terminated by the respective families who share different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. They confessed downheartedly that love between members of different cultural groups did exist, recognising no obstacles, no boundaries; yet the feudal structures of the families, the patriarchal culture, and ethnic differences were among the greatest obstacles. They were by no means enemies of one another but the families were; the families would not leave their sons and daughters to themselves. The immediate, outright response of the younger audience to the production sums up for us the seriousness and the magnitude of the problem:

Probably, we all are of the same opinion and have reached the consensus regarding what we experienced in the play; we think about the loss of young lives in our society today and yesterday. This is the city of Van; anything is possible here, one day an honour killing and another day a long queue in front of the box office to watch a Shakespeare production. (Maro 2)<sup>2</sup>

The audience's direct equation of the story of *Romeo and Juliet* with the current situation in eastern Turkey points to the fact that honour-related crimes are still being committed in the country, showing no sign of slowing down, and spreading at an alarming scale despite the legislative reforms carried out under pressure from the European Union. Hardly a week passes without gruesome footage and news of yet another honour killing in Turkish media. Once a taboo topic, honour killing is now being debated in public, featured on televisions and movies. Even Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* recounts a journalist's investigation in Batman, a poor and rural south-eastern Kurdish town, deeply influenced by conservatism, where teenage girls, mostly rape victims, considered to be dishonoured, are killed by their relatives or commit suicide as a result of family pressures and baseless accusations that they have brought dishonour on their families and therefore they must clean their shame themselves. Turkish feminist novelist Elif Shafak also concentrates exclusively on the notion of honour killing in her recent novel, *Honour*, where she takes up a story of a half Turkish half Kurdish immigrant family living in London. In one of her articles to the *Guardian*, Shafak also denounces the crime as "a symptom of Turkey's strict

patriarchal society. It's time we faced up to this horror" (2011). A survey conducted in 2011 revealed that "nearly 1,000 women were murdered in Turkey in 2009 — a 1,400 percent increase from 2002" (Qtd., Kiener 187). In most cases, victims are young women with offences ranging from "stealing a glance at a boy to wearing a short skirt, wanting to go to the movies, being raped by a stranger or relative or having consensual sex" (Bilefsky). As a punishment for talking to boys, a sixteen year old girl was secretly assassinated by her family members in 2010 in south-eastern Turkey (Kiener 185). In such honour-bound societies, a man's ability to preserve his honour exclusively depends on to what extent he can publicly demonstrate his power to protect his "good name" by eliminating those who damage it. One academic survey of the 180 prisoners of honour crimes in 44 Turkish prisons demonstrated that hundred percent felt neither remorse nor regret for their act, and in some cases the victim's relatives even praised the perpetrators (Gezer). In her analysis Shafak draws attention to another appalling aspect of the crime: "women who are closest to the victims can at times support the decision to kill or remain indifferent to what is taking place" (2012).

### **Honour Killing: A Middle Eastern as well as Universal Phenomenon**

Honour killing is cited by an Amnesty International report as the most serious crime against women in the name of family or community honour ("Pakistan: Honour Killings of Girls and Women" 2-3). Today this inhumane practice is often linked with the Middle Eastern geography or Asian communities and cultures.<sup>3</sup> Whilst honour-related violence is often identified by researchers as a mainly Muslim practise and considered to be exclusive to Islamic cultures, the problem is not apparently unique to any geography or a particular community of the world. These crimes "cross socioeconomic classes and education boundaries, and are part of cultural practices rather than of specific religious beliefs" (Laviosa 186). Often characterized as a global scandal, the problem is spreading rapidly among many communities, rural as well as urban. Middle Eastern countries such as Jordan, Yemen and Palestine have the highest per capita rate of honour killing in the world (Goldstein 31). Isolated incidents of honour killings have also been reported in western countries including Sweden, Britain, Holland, USA, Germany, and most recently, Canada. Fisk identifies the practise as "one of the last great taboos: the murder of at least 20,000 women a year in the name of 'honour', a vile tradition that goes back hundreds of years but which now spans half the globe" (7 Sept.).

Although the perpetrators often attribute their action to religion as justification, these crimes are not certainly rooted in any religious texts whatsoever. In her analysis, Khan emphasizes the role of culture rather than any religion in the perpetuation of honour-related crimes around the globe, arguing that although there is no such thing

in the holy Koran, that permits or sanctions honour killings, the concept of women as commodity is deeply rooted in Eastern cultures and traditions (1999). Many influential Islamic scholars and clerics have spoken out against the practise of honour killings as “vicious phenomenon” (Qtd., Kiener 190). Not only are Muslim women killed or oppressed by their relatives in their respective Muslim countries but also Muslim immigrant communities in the West maintain their traditions and cultural practices along with them. “Daughters and sisters in Sweden, Norway, Germany, or the UK have been murdered. In Sweden the Turkish-Kurd community is notorious for committing honour related violence” (Khan, *Beyond Honour* 21). Shafak entirely agrees: “it is happening here, too, in the heart of Britain. According to the Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organization (IKWRO), more than 2,800 honour-related cases were reported in the UK in 2010. Evidence from police forces reporting suggests an increase of 47% since 2009” (2012). One primary reason why this pervasive problem is seen by the West exclusively as a Muslim phenomenon can be sought in the fact that honour-related murders and violence against young Muslim girls have been more prevalent among the immigrants of Islamic, Kurdish-Turkish, Arab, and Pakistani or North African origin than any other societies living in those countries. Those immigrant families in the West often bring with them amid their language the traditions of their home communities. Rana Husseini comments that whilst punishment of women for illicit sexual activities in Europe drastically began to diminish in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, it is rocketing at a disturbing rate in the Middle Eastern and Muslim communities, in particular (201).

Violence on the basis of honour often involves murder, rape, severe attacks, stoning, forced suicide, even mutilation and dismemberment of the young bodies. The victims are mostly young women, subjected to the violence of many kinds by male relatives even by those they love the most for choosing a marriage partner without the consent of parents, for seeking a divorce or for being raped and even on groundless suspicion that they are having a relationship outside marriage. The evidence or proof of the suspicion is of no consequence; mere allegation of having entered an illicit sexual relationship is enough to ruin a man’s honour within his own community, as a result of which the killing or beating of a woman is justified. In many cases, tribal families would rather kill their daughter to “safeguard their honour” than suffer from stigma of their relationship with unsuitable partners. Isolated cases documented by Amnesty International show that a “husband murdered his wife based on a dream that she had betrayed him. In Turkey, a young woman’s throat was slit in the town square because a love ballad had been dedicated to her over the radio” (Mayell). The victims are hardly given any chance to defend themselves or to give their versions of the allegation. The right to life of a woman is conditional upon their obeying patriarchal

social norms and traditions.

### **Shakespearean Approaches to Honour Crimes and Their Contemporary Resonance**

There is a striking parallel, direct or indirect, deliberate or coincidental, between such contemporary stories of honour-related crimes, fates of modern young people and their counterparts as portrayed in Shakespearean dramatic works such as *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Romeo and Juliet*, in particular.<sup>4</sup> In these texts, Shakespeare exposes honour-bound societies similar, in many respects, to those encountered today among some tribal and feudal cultures. A substantial part of *Othello*, for instance, revolves around the scenario of the beating, abusing and killing of an innocent young woman by her husband simply on the suspicion — without any substantiated evidence — that she has entered into an illegitimate relationship with another man. Othello explicitly makes it clear that the murder of his wife is an honour killing when he portrays himself as an “honourable murderer”(Wells 52). Written after Henry VIII publicly made a spectacle of killing his wife for allegedly committing adultery, *Othello* also “carried the messages of condemnation for adulterous behaviour” (Goldstein29). Similarly, in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare unequivocally touches on honour crime where father Leonato desperately wishes his daughter Hero dead on the erroneous suspicion that she talked with a vile man at her window and therefore she has brought shame and dishonour on the family name.

If Othello is the “most barbarous of all Shakespeare’s misogynists, Leonato comes a close second” (Wells 51), who rashly tries to renounce and obliterate his daughter entirely upon Claudio’s accusations that she is unfaithful and unchaste. Leonato’s immediate reaction is either to commit suicide in despair with a dagger or to kill Hero instantly, believing, like most of the contemporary fathers of honour victims, that it will be better for him to get rid of his daughter than to live in shame permanently. It is well understood that in Shakespeare’s time, chastity and virginity of an upper class woman like Hero at the time of her marriage carried a great significance for her social standing as well as for the reputation of her entire family. Premarital relationships or unchaste behaviours could easily provoke a father into rejecting or even killing his daughter:

Do not live Hero, do not open thine eyes.  
For did I think thou wouldst not quickly die,  
Thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shames,<sup>5</sup> (IV.i. 124-126)

Driven by paranoia and suspicion, Claudio and Leonato continue public shaming of

Hero at the wedding ceremony, which is too horrendous to ignore. Public humiliation and defamation is deliberately used as a form of social punishment, closely connected to loss of honour and loss of reputation. This intimidation in public in a very strong and abusive language can inflict more pain to Hero's honour than would a promiscuous behaviour which, we believe, she never commits; "She is but the sign and semblance of her honour," "foul tainted flesh," "the rotten orange," simply a corpse that can no longer be preserved. With her honour being publicly savaged by these damning accusations, Hero is symbolically dead, never to recover her name and fame again. Claudio and Leonato's quick acceptance of the rumours about Hero's unfaithfulness without investigating the matter more profoundly demonstrates once again how ready men are to believe that their daughters, loved ones, are betraying them and thus tarnishing their honour and family reputation. Today there are quite similar examples of public shaming of women by their relatives, if methods are somewhat different. Yet, unlike the contemporary examples of honour victims, who in most cases have no right to defend themselves, let alone to clear their names, Hero is able to reject the accusations, and is given a chance to restore her honour and to declare that she "talk'd with no man," still a virgin and faithful to Claudio. Different from many of today's examples, the father orders Claudio to clear his daughter's honour by explaining Hero's innocence to entire community. Hero somewhat regains her lost honour eventually, if Leonato and Claudio's accusations in public have tarnished her name permanently.

The view of women as an object or property with very little individual rights of their own was deeply rooted in the Elizabethan society. Women often remained at the lowest bottom of the social ladder and were considered inferior to men (McDonald 252). Whatever freedom women had was granted and taken away by their husbands. All contemporary notions about the idea of marriage gave man this authority: "He was the prince with power — and his wife was his loyal, loving subject" (Papp 73). Yet, this is not entirely the case with Shakespeare's female characters, since they are on occasions portrayed in a dignified manner, cleverer and more cunning than men, holding an elevated status at the centre of the household, taking care of the provision of food and home-medication as well. Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, for instance, ignores the patriarchal norms and the popular notion of arranged marriage, refusing to marry simply because she has not yet discovered the suitable partner. Speaking out against male domination and vigorously rejecting the low status of women in the Renaissance, Beatrice asserts: "I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving" (IV.i. 326-327).

At the same time, it is quite possible to encounter in Shakespeare's texts some references to the subordination of women who after marriage lose everything they

have, their property, their clothes and their jewellery; their husband can sell them, throw them away, give them away or use them as they please. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia repeatedly makes the point when she says to her husband Bassanio:

One half of me is yours, the other half yours-  
 Mine own I would say, but if mine then yours,  
 And so all yours. (III.ii.16-18)

Women are also considered to be a commodity that can be bought and sold or even exchanged. In that case, it is not always the women themselves but predominantly their owners, their fathers or husbands in particular, who have almost every right to decide their fate. Similarly with Portia, Shakespeare puts Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* into the context of a world in which she has hardly any basic control over what happens to her body and her soul, as if she has been thrown into her husband's power. Shaming Kate into a full submission and obedience, Petruchio, in fact, describes the status of his wife with such directness:

She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,  
 My household stuff, my field, my barn,  
 My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything, (III.iii. 102-104)

The conception that women were no different from “commodity” to be possessed or acquired by men somewhat reflects problematic relationship between power and sex in basically patriarchal Elizabethan society “in which female ‘liberty’ was seen as a threat to the whole social order” (Hattaway 106). It would be an oversimplification of Shakespeare's female characters, however, to define them as entirely powerless in their dramatic worlds. In complete contrast to Kate, her sister Bianca, for instance, does obtain what and whom she wants; she does exert control and wield power in marriage. Yet, we are well aware of the fact that what the Elizabethan patriarchy expected and what actually happened in daily life were much different. Unmarried women were supposed to be obedient to their masters and remain virginal until marriage. Strangely enough, works of historians show that an estimate of 20% of the Elizabethan weddings may have taken place while the bride was already pregnant, whilst “the fiction was maintained that the wedding night was the time for defloration” (Cressy 374). Given this double standard in Elizabethan life, it is very possible to read Petruchio's sexist speech ironically.

Since every Elizabethan woman was expected to behave in accordance with the patriarchal value systems, supposed to remain modest, pure, silent, and fully



compliant, Kate's eloquent, talkative, confrontational behaviour in *The Taming of the Shrew* is perceived as immoral or immodest that is deemed to have broken the so-called honour code of the family. Consequently, Kate is subjected to violent treatment, brain washing techniques, which can indeed be interpreted as a form of wife beating or torturing today. The whole process of the "taming" Kate is a kind of torture, a terrible third degree which involves cruelty, physical violence, and depersonalisation even prevention of her from sleeping all night long. Hortensio threatens Kate with a ride in a cart, which can also be taken as a form of punishment for her talkativeness and for her disobedience. Hortensio's attempt to prevent Kate from sleeping was a practice commonly used by the witch-finders of sixteenth century England to obtain a necessary confession from the accused woman. Irrational prejudices against women in that particular period only served to suppress them, giving way to the "witch-hunt of the sixteenth century in which hundreds of defenceless old people were burned to death for the crimes they did not commit" (Papp 43). Kate's father Baptista associates his daughter with witches and ultimately with the devil: "For shame thou hilding of a devilish spirit" (II.i. 26). Baptista's vigorous condemnation of his daughter clearly suggests that Kate in her too loud voice has already transgressed boundaries, duties, and obligations of a daughter according to the Elizabethan patriarchal norms. For a woman in Elizabethan England, to disobey hierarchical order and honour codes of the family was an unforgivable offence against the prestige of the family. The family as a whole was considered to be a monarchy in miniature, with a hierarchical system of its own. Within this hierarchy, father was seen as the "magistrate" with an absolute control of social life and responsibility (Shepherd 160). In the Elizabethan world, virtue was associated with silence, whilst vice was identified with articulateness (Jardine 47).

### **What Does True Love Have to Do with Honour?**

Absolute obedience of Elizabethan daughters to their family, their fathers, in particular, is one of the themes Shakespeare addresses again and again in his work. In *Romeo and Juliet*, a young woman ignores her duties and obligations towards her parents and decides to marry the son of the arch enemy of her family. Acting against the order of her family, Juliet tarnishes the prestige and image of her family and violates the norms of family honour all at once. Through the figure of Juliet, Shakespeare touches on one significant fact of the Elizabethan life that for a girl choosing a marriage partner or expressing a desire to do so was unforgivable. Juliet's unilateral decision means that she has defiled her family's honour and therefore in the eyes of the father, she deserves a severe punishment even death because of acting not according to her parents' will but her own desires:

Hang thee young baggage, disobedient wretch!  
 I tell thee what: get thee to church o' Thursday,  
 Or never after look me in the face.  
 Speak not, reply not, do not answer me. (III.v. 160-163)

It may be useful at this point to emphasize that in the Elizabethan times it was rather fashionable for aristocratic parents like the Capulet family to arrange and force marriage against their daughters' will for obvious reasons. Such arranged marriages in Shakespeare's plays particularly involve high class, noble family members, for whom there are sizable assets and estates to protect or to possess, and political and economic alliances to consider. This was hardly an issue for an average, lower class Elizabethan family. Thus, Juliet's mother deliberately tries to impose a loveless marriage upon her daughter with "the noble gentleman, the County Paris," despite the fact that Juliet utterly rejects and disapproves of that match, thus risking the provocation of her family. Juliet's case leaves the impression that especially the daughters of higher-class family in Shakespeare's time were not entirely in the control of their marital fate mostly due to some awareness of class differences in marriage practices. If parents presented a daughter with a match that met their criteria, she would either accept the offer without any question, or she would resist the match, ultimately evoking resentment and anger of her family. Juliet's father cannot concede that his daughter refuses his offer of Paris and declares instead that the person she will marry is Romeo whom her family hates:

I will not marry yet; and when I do, I swear  
 It shall be Romeo, whom I know you hate,  
 Rather than Paris. (III.v. 119-121)

Juliet's defiant behaviour probably seemed shocking to most of the Elizabethan audience because her bold assertion of her will violates a sacred principle of Elizabethan life; daughters were expected to obey the hierarchical order and the wishes of their parents. As Richard Levin recognised, "the duty of daughters to obey their parents, especially in the choice of a husband, was explicitly affirmed at this time in many of the courtesy books and moral and religious treatises" (17). Juliet's act of disobedience causes not only the destruction of the family honour but also indirectly the destruction of her own life as well, and this dilemma occasioned by a so-called act of disobedience today presents us with the same problem as Juliet's; the problem of marriage without parental consent, which is still judged by some patriarchal cultures

and tribal traditions as unacceptable, immoral, wrongful, and therefore, a punishable offence. Today honour-centred societies experience the similar tragic consequences of the loss of innocent young lives, mostly caused by those men who are forcing their daughters into a loveless marriage and who are thinking only of their honour. Likewise, in *Romeo and Juliet* the young couple provides an ironic counterpoint to the violent behaviour of self-destructive, honour-bound contemporary communities. These two lovers can be seen as the victims of the intolerance and conservatism inherent in feudal systems that put their honour above everything. Foakes most perceptively describes the case of this young couple as the “victims of violence that is generated by their society” (80). There is no doubt that, by putting the scenario of the play in Verona, geographically away from early modern England, and by transforming these kinds of wrong social behaviours into fiction, Shakespeare seems to use the opportunity to awaken the social awareness of his patriarchal audience to these unacceptable social norms and relationships. Today, in so many patriarchal systems, where women’s rights are deliberately ignored, there are many examples of love affairs or relationships as such that are prematurely terminated by the family members who consider their daughter’s choice of marriage partner as a shameful act of defiance damaging family’s reputation. The figures of the young couple as such portrayed in *Romeo and Juliet* can still be encountered in our modern world, more frequently in societies where a marriage, an illicit love affair or a relationship of a young woman to a man, who is culturally, linguistically, religiously and ethnically different from her own, is less tolerated.

### **Killing of a Daughter on the Basis of Family Honour**

Shakespeare raises the issue of honour killing in one of his gruesome plays, *Titus Andronicus*, where “patriarchal consumption of the woman’s victimised body is also made explicit” (Hiscock 227). Titus, a Roman general, treats his only daughter Lavinia viciously and commits a premeditated murder of the young girl after she was raped and her chastity spoiled by his arch enemies.<sup>6</sup> Titus does not even hesitate to kill his son, Mutius who asks for forgiveness for his fleeing sister. As in the Elizabethan period, women had very few rights in ancient Rome. A daughter represented the “honour” of her father prior to her marriage. According to Roman law, a father had the authority to eliminate his unmarried daughter for any lack of sexual discretion. Female adultery was a serious crime under Roman law, which required the prosecution of the family who turned a blind eye to it. Neglecting the consideration and love every father should have and acting heartlessly against the wishes and desires of a young girl, silencing her and subjecting her to patriarchal oppression, Titus, like Juliet’s father, has arranged to marry Lavinia to the Emperor Saturninus. Titus simply tries to turn

his daughter into a senseless creature for the sake of preserving his social standing and reputation. Instead of marrying the man of her father's choice, Lavinia, ignoring her daughterly obligations, elopes with Bassianus, with whom she is in love. With this play, Shakespeare once again presents the audience with a typical example of a practice of a patriarchal father trying to marry his daughter to a noble man, which was by no means unfamiliar to a large section of the upper class Elizabethan society where most of the marriages were arranged for obvious reasons.

Peculiar to all honour-related crimes today, the acts of violence in *Titus Andronicus* include rape, killing, mutilation and dismemberment. A rape victim herself, Lavinia appears to be one of the most incapacitated heroines delineated by Shakespeare. The rape of Lavinia is undoubtedly the central and most horrific crime in the play, which leads to her killing for reasons of honour and family reputation. Encouraged by their mother Tamora and incited by Aaron,<sup>7</sup> Chiron and Demetrius brutally rape Lavinia in the forest during a hunt, after which they cut off her hands and tongue so that she cannot give their crime away. In the process, the Goth princes even make fun of Lavinia, squabbling over who loves her more, despite the fact that they are merely guided by lust and desire of rape, hoping to "pluck a dainty doe to ground" (II.ii. 26). The Goths continue to torment Lavinia, verbally insulting her, satisfying their animal desires on her, inflicting her more pain and finally leaving her alone in the wilderness instead of killing her instantly. Trying to flee in shame, Lavinia is brought to her father by her uncle Marcus. As stage direction says, Lavinia's hands are "cut off, and her tongue cut out," and she is totally "ravished." Upon discovering that his daughter has been abused and raped in the forest, and thus robbed of her most precious chastity by the arch enemy Goths, Titus plunges into a deep sorrow. Titus thinks that his honour has been contaminated because her daughter's virginity has been taken not by her husband but by other men she is not related to. Loss of virginity of a daughter is an absolute blot on Titus's honour, a stain that cannot be wiped out until the death of the young girl. Believing that honour is the only thing a man has, Titus does not hesitate to take action in order to safeguard his status and cleanse his daughter's shame since she was "enforced, stained and deflowered" (V.iii. 38). Horrified by this brutal act, Titus immediately calls his close ally Saturninus and asks if Virginius, an exemplary father and symbol of Roman virtue, should have slaughtered his daughter because she had been raped and thus brought dishonour to her father. Totally unaware of the absolutely similar situation that Titus is currently confronted with, Saturninus unhesitatingly suggests by a sheer coincidence that Titus should instantly remove the perceived stain on the family's reputation by slaying his daughter with his own right hand: "Because the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew his sorrows" (V.iii. 40-41).

Conforming to one of the cultural practices of the Roman times, Saturninus “subscribes to the logic of honour killing” (Willis 50). It is probably this coincidental act of provocation by Saturninus that has eventually led Titus to resort to summary execution of his daughter. Saturninus may be referring to an important fact of life in Roman times that a “girl whose chastity was stained should by no means survive her shame.” Saturninus’s role in the whole process should be dealt with in a different context, since he was utterly unaware of the current situation while pronouncing death sentence to a girl who had been raped. However, his sharp, direct, inciting words and his provocative behaviours call to mind his contemporary accomplices and perpetrators of honour killing; today head of the clan or head of the family council is always consulted as to what sort of punitive action should be imposed on those who have damaged the family honour. It seems Lavinia’s fate is permanently sealed, since her father is counselled by Saturninus and thus convinced that a victim of rape deserves to die. As Titus kills Lavinia, he cries:

For me, most wretched, to perform the like.  
Die, die Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,  
And with thy shame thy father’s sorrow die. (V.iii. 42-44)

Defending his lost honour with violence, “the patriarchal father most obviously reasserts himself: in killing Lavinia, he submits to classical precedent, removes the ‘stain’ from family honour” (Willis 49). Indeed, Titus’s shame and honour take priority over his daughter’s life. Family honour may be somewhat restored; however it is apparent that Titus has not totally ended his agony by killing Lavinia.

Titus’s choice of defending his family’s prestige with violence and cleansing his lost honour by taking the life of the rape victim is a grim reminder of what we are witnessing currently in some honour killings, which are motivated by almost comparable reasons. Like Lavinia’s father, families of rape victims ignore the suffering of their daughters as if rape were to be understood solely as a stain on patriarchal family honour. Women are punished today even when they are the victims of rape, not only by strangers but also by their own fathers and brothers even uncles. A fifteen year old girl in the Turkish city of Batman was brutally killed and thrown into a river by her closest relatives, and her body later found by fishermen in December 2012, when her family realised that the girl was four months pregnant as a result of a rape reportedly conducted by her cousins. The brutal rape and murder of 20 year old Banaz Mahmut by her uncle and father in 2006 because of her illicit sexual relationship with a man, and the murder and the mutilation of Rukhsana Naz, strangled by her family because she wanted a divorce in 1999 in the United Kingdom

(Birch) are other typical contemporary examples that show suggestive parallels to the stories presented in *Titus Andronicus*. As one critic comments: “nothing comes closer to *Titus Andronicus* than the insistent, terrible stories of gang rape by United States personnel in Abu Ghraib. Most of the women in the prison were raped — some of them left prison pregnant. Families killed some of these women — because of the shame” (Fisk, 10 Sept.). Also in her 1999 feature adaptation of the play, Julie Taymor constantly “linked the ‘honor killing’ of Lavinia to the widely reported Bosnian practice of killing women who, during the war, had been raped by Serbs in a systematic campaign rape-as-ethnic cleansing” (Aebischer 123). These victims of sexual violence in Bosnia were abandoned by the families because of a huge stigma attached to rape in their patriarchal culture where communal pride was inseparably linked to their virginity and their loyalty as married women. With Titus, who shows his cold heartedness to his own family members for the sake of his honour and who actually looks for his lost honour in the drops of his innocent daughter’s blood, Shakespeare attempts to mock the ancient Roman virtue and concept of honour, and the wrong, unacceptable patriarchal assumptions by any standards. Referring to the Roman concept of honour, Shakespeare also attempts to draw attention to women’s plight, evoking Roman decadence and brutality and subverting social norms and behaviours of his time.

**“For Naught I Did in Hate, but All in Honour.”**

Of all Shakespeare’s plays, *Othello* is probably the most relevant text in the discussion of the Renaissance concept of honour in relation to women, given the fact that the whole text revolves around honesty, honour, sexual chastity, and faithfulness. However, one point should be made clear that Shakespeare portrays Othello not as an Englishman but as a Moor, an outsider, non-European, the “Other” in Christian Venice, who consistently starts out in the play as nobler than anyone, yet ends up looking more barbaric than anyone else except Iago. In Elizabethan drama, tyrannous and barbaric acts of violence are typically “associated with outsiders, Muslims, Jews, Turks, Moors, savages, representatives of the ‘Other’, of countries or societies outside the bounds of Christendom” (Foakes 72). Othello’s suspicion of Desdemona’s infidelity and jealousy overcomes him. “Once Othello gives way to his jealous will and tyrannous hate the audience sees him transformed into a version of Islamic tyrant” (Vitkus 99).

As is the case with Titus, Othello is seeking the fulfilment of his obsession with honour in the blood of his wife, slaughtering her because of the suspicion about her cheating on him with Cassio, formerly his right hand man. The truth of his suspicion in this context does not really matter for Othello; mere rumours or an allegation of

infidelity is enough to bring dishonour on Othello's fame as a "valiant" commander of the Christians against the "Turkish infidels." Othello decides that the only way of redeeming his honour and clearing his wife's illicit relationship with Cassio is to kill her. In a way, Desdemona is punished brutally for allegedly committing a sin, which was principally regarded in the Elizabethan period as unfaithfulness and betrayal. Since Othello's attacks centre on the issue of sexual obedience to a single man, fidelity, chastity and honesty, it can clearly be understood that Othello has put his honour above everything even above his current position as the defender of Cyprus from a possible Turkish occupation. For him, life without his honour is not even worth living. As one critic interprets, this murder has nothing to do with jealousy and love. Rather, Othello emerges as a man who regards himself as the chastising judge of Desdemona's shame, and as "the physician of his honour; he performs this deed, according to his last testimony, not from hatred, but from honour" (Gervinus 543). Thus, the idea of "honour" emerges in the play as the most dominant weapon Othello uses against his wife.

With Desdemona as "an unfortunate victim of Othello's tragic misconception" (Snow 396), Shakespeare confronts us with the predicament of a woman caught within wrong norms of a patriarchal society. In the male order of things, Shakespeare pertinently exposes social indifference to violence against women through Cassio who, for instance, expresses very little concern over Desdemona's death. Instead, he responds with reverence to Othello's deeds as "honourable": "For he was great of heart" (V.ii. 361). Cassio's words might be interpreted as a clear indication of how societal attitudes condone violence against women and implicitly endorse men killing women who are ultimately regarded as their possession. Even today, as it was yesterday, a considerable number of young women in honour-bound societies suspected of having a relationship of some kind with a man are still being subjected to all sorts of intimidation, physical abuse, torture and even death. Like his modern prototypes of honour killers, who often decide the fate of a woman when she is accused of dishonour, Othello also decides the fate of his wife for very obvious reasons, creating an apprehension, scepticism and fantasy of his wife, and then develops irrational, baseless thoughts such as interpreting his handkerchief in Cassio's hands as absolute proof of her infidelity and ingratitude. Othello develops further his suspicion that Desdemona cannot be trusted at all, claiming that she must be killed or otherwise she will betray more men around her. In the moments before and after killing her, Othello publicly shames Desdemona by referring to her as a cunning "whore" of Venice. The bitter irony is, however, that Desdemona and Othello's marriage may not have been fully consummated; it is most likely that Desdemona's virginity still remains intact. It can readily be seen that in Othello's patriarchal culture,

communal pride is inevitably linked to the virginity of a woman.

Given that Turkish-Venetian war is looming, and the Turkish invasion of the Venetian controlled island of Cyprus is impending, defending the honour of the Venetian state and eliminating the Turkish threat for good appears less a priority for Othello as a commander than his domestic honour, his virtue, and his social standing. Othello openly exaggerates Desdemona's "infidelity" out of all proportion to human possibility and compares her sexual encounters with men with the breeding of summer flies, which demonstrates the importance to him of his wife's virginity. More to the point, Othello has a pain upon his forehead, implying that an invisible horn is growing out of his head — a traditional symbol of cuckoldry. This allusion seems to suggest that he desperately wants to confront his wife with his deep suspicions of unfaithfulness implanted in his mind by Iago. Alone with Desdemona, Othello declares that he could have borne any affliction other than the pollution of the fountain from which his tree of life is to grow.

Similarly, in our modern world, one of the most common excuses for honour killing is suspicion of an intimate relationship between a woman and a man, whether alleged adultery, sex, outside of marriage or a suspicion of simply becoming close companionships. One report documents that in tribal communities a woman can dishonour her family by standing too close to a man she is not related to ("Killing of Women on the Basis of Family Honour"). No doubt, Desdemona is killed by the same token. Today, killing to save family honour, to wipe out the disgrace is seen as a social disciplinary duty. Like Othello, honour-bound families attach their moral reputation to the female members of their family, to their women's bodies. Thus, "honour" and its natural outcome "shame" are mere instruments referred to by men to control women's sexuality. Othello's baseless delusions and suspicions of his wife end in murder, his accusations of Desdemona, his fear of being cheated by another man, inducing fear of losing his honour in public, and being labelled as a cuckold or as the man whose wife has committed adultery has probably been one of the biggest common apprehensions of men throughout history. In this context, it can be argued that the fear of being cheated by a woman is timeless and ageless. As one critic aptly remarks, "the innumerable jokes about cuckolds in Renaissance dramatic texts, combined with sermonising against adultery, suggest that marital infidelity was a familiar and troublesome social problem" (McDonald 268).

What is remarkable about Shakespeare's treatment of tragic young female characters is that his full sympathies are aligned with them. The reality in Elizabethan society, as opposed to the reality portrayed on the Shakespearean stage, was that the clash between parents' wishes and wishes of the daughters was generally decided in favour of the parents. In spite of social pressures, Shakespeare gives us many forceful



fluent female characters. Through the figures of Desdemona, Juliet and Lavinia, in particular, he explores a daughter's right to choose her husband, exposing a confident assertion of the need for fathers to acknowledge and respect a daughter's right to choose. Yet, these young women ironically share more or less the same destiny as they fall victim to the laws of arbitrary and unjust moral, social customs, and transgress the limits of social conventions and arbitrarily changing rules of feudalism and tribalism. As regards honour-related violence and oppression, Shakespeare very strongly emphasizes that it is an absolutely wrong cultural tradition, and it is indeed a brutal act of savagery. We should remember that the kind of violence dramatized in *Othello* was by no means acceptable to the Elizabethans, nor would it be for the overwhelming majority in many societies. For instance, towards the play's end, when Othello comes to realize the innocence of his wife, he feels remorse for sure, and admits that "the murder was a misplaced act of honour" (Wells 51). Admitting the atrocity he has committed, Othello also feels that he is too wicked to be allowed the sight of his dead wife, thus demonstrating "a typical male perception of women, alternately worshipping her as an angel and damning her as a whore" (Hadfield 164). However, unlike Othello, who feels a deep regret after all, quite many of the contemporary perpetrators of honour killing hardly feel shameful for what they did. Majority claim that they did commit honour crime to safeguard tribal honour and to wash with a young woman's blood the family honour; honour is the only thing a man should maintain at all costs.

These instances of violence examined in the plays leave the notion that brutal killings of Desdemona and Lavinia in the name of a man's honour do not by any means heal the anger of Othello and Titus. Likewise, Juliet's death, which resulted ultimately from her parents' obsession with family prestige, cannot spare the honour of the Capulet family. Tragic loss of lives does not clear these women of their alleged sins, either. It may well be that between these two extreme situations, the utter rejection of these wrong cultural, tribal traditions, on the one hand, and the endorsement of the maintenance of absolute authority of the Elizabethan parents over their daughters and sons in the matter of marriage, on the other hand, Shakespeare makes his point and provides a practical lesson to his audience by indicating that "like should marry like."

### **Honour Crimes: Unchanging Facet of Barbarism Today and Yesterday**

The fictional events portrayed in these particular plays, which are taking place in different settings and different eras somewhat reflect the common life experiences of humanity both in the past and in the present. Perhaps it would not be too much to suggest that honour-related violence, whether in Shakespeare's time or today, has

always been connected with sex, virginity, chastity, infidelity, and filial disobedience. These crimes, which conspicuously held particular weight in the Elizabethan culture, still continues to be part of our life even in the twenty first century, among the members of the feudal, tribal and patriarchal societies as one of the gruesome realities of life. Yesterday saw witch-hunting for women who were perceived as deceiving, being dishonest, dangerous creatures, and today sees honour killing, with scapegoats readily available, easy targets, believed to deceive men and destroy men's honour. Honour killing is one of the most brutal examples of how culture, tradition and religion have been misused or abused to perpetuate violence against women. Strangely enough, neither the Renaissance as an age of social changes and new discoveries nor post-modern technological advances and the civilization of the twenty first century, nor legislative reforms and law-centred policies has been able to succeed in obliterating this centuries old vile tradition. It seems that killing and defamation of young women, which is still strongly embedded in the socio-cultural religious fabric of contemporary communities, will continue to be one of the unresolved issues of modern civilisation as long as man maintains his desire to look for his lost honour, his lost reputation, his masculinity in the blood of young women. Hence, patriarchal mind-sets must effectively be confronted and this serious social problem vigorously challenged.

## Notes

1. Despite the fact that honour crimes often come to be associated with eastern Turkey, surveys show that honour-related murders are not confined to this particular region only, but are committed in almost every region of the country ("Kadının Gündemi").
2. English translation mine.
3. In countries where Islam is practiced this crime is called "honour killing." Yet dowry deaths and so-called crimes of passion have similar dynamic and motives in that women are indiscriminately killed by male family members, even male relatives. These types of crimes are also widespread, for instance, in Latin American countries and the Indian sub-continent.
4. Although the plays to be discussed in relation to honour killing are all set in foreign lands, Italy or ancient Rome, we should assume that these geographical locations were equivalent in the minds of the Elizabethan audience to a considerable degree. Thus, the actions of the plays should not be viewed solely as Italianate or foreign to Shakespeare's audience.
5. All references to Shakespeare are from Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (eds), *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
6. During the Roman period issue of honour was also of key concern. Even philosophers and thinkers like Cicero, Seneca, Horace, Tacitus and Juvenal considered lack of feminine chastity as the prime sin, and believed that sexual transgression of a woman brought shame to the entire family, and

suggested, therefore, that women be restricted in the house in order to be kept chaste (Rana).

7. Aaron is a Moorish character, an outsider and a very cruel person who commits crime after crime, “a black fly” whose soul is inherently black.

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