HONOUR-BASED CRIMES IN PAKISTAN: NARRATIVES OF VICTIMS, AGGRESSORS AND BYSTANDERS

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Abstract

The study explores the causes of honour-based crimes through the narratives of victims, aggressors and bystanders, which were unfolded in documentary films: A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015) and Saving Face (2012). Selected narratives are interpreted by taking the socio-cultural perspectives that draw on the cultural manifestation of honour crimes. The study shows that the ‘ideology of honour’ is one of the major causes of honour crimes in Pakistan. Unlike Western discourses, which empower a woman institutionally to resist honour crimes, Pakistani women are either hushed or forced to compromise despite the presence of law to punish the aggressors. The study recommends that state and non-state institutions play an effective role through the local councils of Pakistan in dealing with honour crimes and rehabilitation of victims through the provision of remunerative work.

Keywords
Honour-based crime, victim, aggressor, bystander, Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan is an honour-based society. Gill, Strange and Roberts (2014) and Pedja (2016) argue that honour is usually equated with the regulation of women’s sexuality and their
conformity with social norms and traditions. Thus, honour is viewed as a form of symbolic capital; the loss of honour generates shame and disgrace, both to individuals and to their relatives and community (c.f., Strange 2016). Dogan (2014) adds that in a patriarchal society, the loss of honour is equated with the loss of life. Although both men and women are victims of honour-based crimes (HBC), there is lack of empirical data to report the proportion of such crimes. In Pakistani society, however, HBC are mostly linked to women.

An estimated number of more than 5000 women are killed across the world each year by male relatives who believe that the victims have dishonoured their families (Gill, Strange and Roberts, 2014; Kanchan, Tandon and Krishan, 2015; Strange, 2016). About one fifth of these killings occur in Pakistan, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2016). Not long ago these crimes were reported only from remote rural parts of Pakistan; today the crime narratives come from urban areas as well. The Aurat Foundation (2012), an NGO working for women and gender development, noted an increasing frequency of HBC both in rural and urban areas of Pakistan. Urban areas of the Punjab have a greater number of reported cases than the rural zones (Nazki 2016). A report retrieved from the Punjab police (INP 2016) indicates 231 murders in the name of honour. Reports from various newspapers in Pakistan affirm a surge of honour killing in recent years in Punjab that has exceeded the number of cases in Sindh, the second largest province by population after Punjab. HBC are mainly carried out in the suburbs of Lahore, Sialkot, Gujranwala, Faisalabad and Multan (Mahfooz 2018; Fareed 2018). However, Faisalabad and its surrounding districts recorded the highest number of incidents of HBC in 2017 (INP 2018). The report by Punjab Police (2018) indicates a gruesome picture of cases in Punjab where Faisalabad and its surrounding regions upsurge with 71 honour-killing cases in 2011, 92 in 2013, 76 in 2015 and 61 in 2016. The victims were chiefly women.

Cultural and social norms instruct women to obey their elders’ decision in choosing a life partner. Although both men and women have an equal right, according to Islam, to choose their partners (Surah Al-Nisa 4:3), usually men are given preference over women. Contrary to this expectation, if a woman chooses to marry a person of her own choice, it raises anxiety among her kin and provokes reactions in the form of Karo Kari and Siyah Kari-literally meaning committing black deeds-cultural labels for honour killing in Sindh and Punjab (Patel and Gadit 2008; Lari 2011; Bhanbhro et al. 2013). Dyer (2015) argues that honour killings are premeditated and customary crimes carried out to restore the respect of families. It is observed that in the areas where HBC are prevalent, a woman who selects her spouse or desires to seek independence through employment and education is opposed by the patriarchal head (Raza and Liaqat 2016; Grzyb 2016). It is significant to note that all HBC are not caused by women’s ‘deviant behaviour’ alone;
'honour' is used as a ploy to cover other ulterior motives, such as usurpation of property, second marriage by the husband or settling family disputes and murdering their enemies.

Despite a landmark law in 2016 by the Government of Pakistan to criminalize all forms of violence against women, there is an increase in HBC across the country (Fatima et al. 2016; Shahzad 2017). Consequently, in tribal areas, remote and less developed regions where there is no writ of the State, such crimes are authorized and legitimized by local councils under the vague excuse of traditions. Thus, these gruesome murders continue to be regarded as a community matter to be resolved through blood money to victims’ families (c.f., Warraich 2005; Eisner and Ghuneim 2013; Kanchan, Tandon and Krishan 2015; Strange 2016).

An unprecedented increase in honour-crimes in Pakistan inspired two Oscar award-winning documentaries by Shirmeen Obaid Chinoy. Both documentary films, A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015) and Saving Face (2012), unfold real life stories of honour victims (Zakia, Rukhsana and Saba). The present study explores the causes of HBC through the narratives of victims, aggressors and bystanders as shown in the documentaries. In doing so, the study reveals (a) how HBC are legitimated by aggressors, (b) how honour crimes are interpreted by bystanders and social actors, (c) whether honour crimes are religiously motivated or culturally rooted in Pakistani society, and (d) how far HBV were successful in surpassing the oppressive discourses. Researchers from a wide range of disciplines such as criminology, sociology, anthropology, law, history, and political science have investigated HBC from the perspective of cultural, social and political norms, but there is little research that has investigated the issue by unfolding the narratives of victims, aggressors and bystanders through a socio-cultural approach (c.f., Carbaugh 2005; Shixu 2016; Rafi 2017). This study, therefore, is the first to focus on these three perspectives.

The focus of this approach is to show cultural patterns which are responsible for HBC (Dorjee, Baigand Ting-Toomey 2013; Eisner and Ghuneim 2013; Gill 2014; Dogan 2014; Ercan 2015; Strange 2016). Habiba, Ali and Ashfaq (2016) argue that from early childhood women in Pakistan are governed by certain dos and don’ts. Women who fall in love, choose their own husbands and seek divorce are considered deviant in their behaviour and hence liable to be straightened by harsh penalties. Such behaviour in extreme cases involves direct violence such as honour killing and withdrawal of family benefits and security (c.f., Coomaraswamy 2005). We observe violation of women’s right by inhuman and discriminatory practices in the documentary films: A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015) and Saving Face (2012). Both documentary films uncover honour crime incidents by taking the perspectives of victims, aggressors and bystanders. The
following methodology was adopted regarding the selection of film text to identify commonly emerging patterns used to interpret the causes of honour crimes in Pakistan.

Nature and analysis of the data

The text of the documentaries was sorted, numbered from [1] to [8] and categorized for commonly emerging themes based on the narratives of the victims (i.e., Saba, Zakia and Rukhsana), aggressors (i.e., Saba’s father and uncle, Zakia’s and Rukhsana’s husband), bystanders (i.e., family members and community) and social actors (i.e., police and lawyers). Each illustration extracted from the selected documentaries was transliterated and numbered [1-8] for sequencing the presentation of data and for an intelligible referencing. Since the participants chose local languages (i.e., dialects of Punjabi) to narrate their stories, there is a fair chance of culturally embedded expressions, which lack in many ways structural and semantic equivalence. Their narratives were investigated to gain insight into the causes of HBC. Followed by the selection and categorization of the texts, linguistic and meta-linguistic properties were studied to show how the dominant groups legitimate HBC. Though I tried to arrive at an interpretation by taking different perspectives, I could not rule out the possibility of my own experience, knowledge, belief and ideology influencing interpretation of the narratives. However, an emic observation of HBC helped me to go further in depth on details of socio-cultural practices and beliefs of the participants.

The study interprets the selected texts at four stages: (a) the causes of honour crimes, which surface in the narratives of the victims; (b) perspectives of the aggressors; (c) observations of the bystanders; and (d) the role of institutional representatives such as police and lawyers (who were noted as bystanders by some definitions). The third stage provided me insight about how honour crimes and the position of victims and aggressors within the prevailing social discourses are perceived by bystanders. Hence, the study explores HBC and their resolution from the perspectives of victims, aggressors and bystanders.

Narratives of victims

In the documentary A Girl in the River: Price of Forgiveness, an 18-year-old woman (Saba) is a rare survivor of attempted murder by her father and uncle. Her only crime was to run off and marry a boy (Qaiser) she had fallen in love with. Her family wanted her to marry someone whom she did not know. She had known Qaiser for four years before she was punished for committing an honour-based crime. On the other hand, Zakia and Rukhsana were victims of an acid attack. They were tortured and abused for not helping their husbands (Pervez and Yasir) with money that they did not have. Unlike Saba’s father (Maqsood), Pervez and Yasir denied their crime.
Although all the victims prosecuted the crimes, only Zakia could pursue the case to its logical conclusion. Pervez was awarded two life imprisonments. Both Saba and Rukhsana compromised with the aggressors, but Zakia never listened to any such threats by her husband and the in-laws. Saba forgave her father because of the pressure and influence of her neighbours. Similarly, Zakia started living a normal life with her husband for the sake of her children. Perhaps, it is hard to say explicitly, power and resistance exist in the same body. Social agents such as, lawyers, doctors and social activists supported the resistance exerted by Zakia. Victims are mostly hushed and pressured by family and community, who preserve ‘honour’ or ‘respect’ as an instrument for compromise with aggressors, as supported by Rafi (2017). Not surprisingly, the life of a Pakistani woman is controlled in many ways. Unlike some societies where adult children are responsible for their lives, parents in Pakistani culture look after their children as long as they live. Hence, we may not perceive a Pakistani woman from the Western lens. Eventually, she is supposed to obey her parents and elders regarding important matters surrounding her life. The study reveals a poor correlation between ‘power’ and ‘resistance’ by the victims.

Narratives of aggressors

The aggressors either denied or legitimated what they did. As illustrated in [1] extracted from A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness, Maqsood said he was angry at Saba because she ran off and married against his wish and thus humiliated and disrespected him in the eyes of the people. While behind bars, he disclosed,

[1]

Whatever we did, we were obliged to do it. She took away our ‘respect’. I am an honourable man. Why did she leave home? I laboured and earned lawfully to feed her. This was unlawful of her. I have my honour and pride. I could not bear that. She destroyed everything, even my lawful labour. So, I said no, I will kill you myself. You are my daughter, I will kill you myself. Why did you leave home with an outsider?

The concept of ‘honour’ or ‘respect’ in the Urdu language (Izzat or Ghairat) is usually collocated with ‘life’. The loss of honour is equated with the loss of life. Honour is defined by cultural norms that are considered unchangeable. The web of these norms enslaves people in many ways to enact their lives. Those who limit their lives according to social norms are perceived as disciplined and honourable. They are pushed by society to invade and even murder someone to restore honour in the eyes of the people. Maqsood reiterated in his statement in [2] that whatever he did was to restore the respect and honour that Saba destroyed by getting married without his consent. Perhaps he was the least bit ashamed of his crime. This statement shows the ignorance of an aggressor who believes honour to be something held higher than moral and religious values. Moreover, an overwhelming use of
the ‘I’ pronominal in his narrative further reveals his subjective position for feelings, thoughts and respect sanctioned by social norms. Hence, he had no choice but to kill his daughter to remain honorable in the eyes of people he was living with.

[2]

Maqsood: After this incident, everybody says that I am more respected. They say that I am an honourable man. They say what I did was right. It was the proper thing to do.

Pervez and Yasir categorically denied their crime. While in police custody, Pervez blamed his wife (Zakia) for having extra-marital affairs. His father (Taj) repeated the same. Pervez said that there was a conspiracy hatched against him. He said that Zakia’s boyfriend threw acid on her in order to trap him into this crime. On the other hand, Yasir blamed Rukhsana as a psychopath. He said that one day she lost her mind and threw gasoline on herself. A candle was burning nearby. The gasoline fell on it and caught fire and the flames engulfed her. Such events reflect Pakistan as a male chauvinist society underpinned by a notion of honour, fundamentally connected to controlling women’s bodies (Raza, 2006; Gill, 2014). Crimes of honour limit their rights to life, freedom from gender-based discrimination, rights to marry and rights to prosecution against violence. Even when a girl is wed, she is advised by her parents to endure all kind of hardships and not to complain against the evil practices of her husband and in-laws. Most become victims of blackmailing after their wedding. They are deliberately kept socio-economically and educationally backwards (see e.g., Kasturi1996; Rouse 2004; Khoja-Moolji 2015; Pratt 2016). In addition, they begin to believe in that is how their life must be.

Narratives of the bystanders

There are mixed opinions of bystanders on honour crimes. Saba’s family commented that what she did was against family traditions and values. Maqsooda (Saba’s mother) correlated her crime with the family’s ‘honour’ in the social discourse. She said that as Saba had ruined her respect, she did not wish to live any longer and she prayed for her own death. Aqsa (Saba’s sister) said that she could not step out of her house because people taunted and mocked her after this incident. She justified the crime of her father in [3]. Simply, she declared her father not guilty. In the same vein, Maqsooda (Saba’s mother) was convinced that her husband was forced to kill his daughter because of her behaviour. While outside the courtroom, Taj (Pervez’s father), justifying his son’s anger, vehemently argued that no righteous husband could tolerate loss of his honour. He said that this [crime] was bound to happen. Similarly, Saba’s sister (Aqsa) claimed in [3],

All our family did was to preserve their integrity and honour. Who can tolerate such betrayal from a daughter who runs away and marries without their consent?
In addition to her own family, some influential people of the community also lamented in the excerpt [4] that what Saba did in a way created a hype that eventually forced her father and uncle to manhandle and shoot her. They believe that parents who nurture their children are within their rights to decide about their off springs’ future. No parents would tolerate their daughters’ running away from home. Thus, by presenting this argument, they justified the crime that Maqsood and his brother committed. Furthermore, they also pressured Saba, through her in-laws, to withdraw the prosecution because one of the culprits was her own father, the only breadwinner of his family. Thus, Saba was brainwashed to forgive her father's crime for the sake of the family.

The community leaders pursued a similar argument and said [4],

Our society does not respect people whose daughter runs away. People with such tarnished reputation lose all respect in the society. Parents put in so many efforts to nurture and support and care for their children. Don’t the parents have a right to decide their children’s future?

Shafaqat (Saba’s brother in-law) told how he was influenced and threatened by some of the community members for a compromise. He expressed his helplessness in [5]. Similarly, Rukhsana was blackmailed for the sake of her children to compromise with Yasir.

[5]

A compromise must be reached. There is no other way. We live in the same neighbourhood. And one must abide by its customs. How long we can live with the same conflict.

Narratives of social actors

Voices of educated and professional men and women against HBC reveal how such crimes are reinforced and hushed. Ali Akber (a police officer) acknowledged in [6] that there is always an immense social pressure for forgiveness. The feeling of being forgiven in many ways mitigates a likelihood to commit the crime again. He suggested that Saba should have pursued her case.

[6]

Ali Akber: if there is forgiveness and the case is finished early, then a message is sent that this crime is not a big deal. You can kill and go free.

Asad Jamal, Saba’s pro-bono lawyer expressed his disappointment in [7] over the matter of forgiveness and compromise. Saba’s in-laws, pressured by their neighbours, forced her to
record her statement of forgiveness and dismiss the case. The lawyer, however, reiterated that honour killing should be treated as a murder under Pakistani law and the case must be prosecuted in the court of law like any murder case.

[7] I can understand why she is inclined to reach compromise. Our justice system is not strong enough to provide her security. When the law allows this kind of settlement, the court in such instances becomes merely a post office.

Sarkar Abbas (Zakia’s lawyer) thought similarly in [8] that there were certain gaps in the law supporting women against culprits of HBC. However, she was determined to fight against the crime that Pervez did. She wanted to set a precedent with Zakia’s case. She believed that there were rare cases when women raised their voice for justice. However, Zakia is an exception in this context. Pervez was awarded two-times life imprisonment by the court of law.

[8] Most of the women in our society do not come to the courts for justice. For our present laws are too lenient, and most of the culprits are acquitted for penalties are less severe.

The study reveals oppressive discourse and how aggressors and bystanders in the selected documentary films legitimate these discourses. Socio-cultural norms govern the voices of the victims, such as family ideology and patriarchal values. The victims challenged patriarchal discourses dominated largely by ignorance and poverty. Saba, Zakia and Rukhsana were victimized for making their own choices. The study shows that honour crimes are masked by social norms, family ideologies and patriarchal values. Social actors, to mount resistance and bring to book the perpetrators, may sometimes protect and support these crimes. Media plays a pivotal role in putting weight behind this resistance but HCV are far from the goal of surpassing oppressive discourse.

This study portrays a paradoxical picture of the social norms that govern a woman’s body. While a man is allowed to run away from his parents’ home and marry a woman of his choice, a woman on the other hand is victimised and brutally punished for doing so. Indeed, some discourse views this act as manly and considers it to be a symbol of male chivalry and valour. Why are the social norms different for men and women? Seeking an answer to this query, the present study shows that the social norms are made to control and confine women to limits set by male norms of the society. First, women must satisfy men’s sexual impulses, manage their homes and nurture their children. Within this confined theatre, a woman's freedom to choose poses a formidable threat to man’s
hegemony and sexual impulses. Thus, resistance to the historic hegemonic discourse results in honour crimes, such as acid attacks impulsive divorces, and in the worst cases honour killings.

Curiously, the narratives unfolded by the victims, aggressors, bystanders and social actors do not include any reference to religion, in the context of Pakistan to ‘Islam’-the religion of the majority of victims and perpetrators of crimes- to legitimate honour crimes. Rather, they refer mainly to the ideology of honour, respect and dignity structured by social norms that revolve around women’s sexuality.

Conclusion

The study unmasks the taken-for-granted everyday discourse on honour crimes shown in the documentary films: A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015) and Saving Face (2012) and makes visible the faulty ideology of honour that is a unifying force behind HBC in Pakistan. Such crimes are exacerbated by the socio-cultural norms linked with a woman’s body. The narratives unfolded by the victims, aggressors and bystanders show no reference to religion for perpetuating crimes of honour. The study suggests the need for a shift in cultural, social, economic and political spheres towards the protection and care of women; however, men must be part of the solution (see e.g., Katz 2016). Legislation alone against honour crimes may not be very helpful. This study suggests a multi layered approach by the government of Pakistan to empower women through education, by creating equal job opportunities and invoking the local councils to play effective roles for combat against honour crimes. Media ought to raise awareness against HBC rather than sensationalizing such events (Huda and Kamal 2017). An ethnographic study could be carried out independently to investigate education as a correlate of women’s empowerment in patriarchal discourses (c.f., Khoja-Moolji 2015).
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