

Research Paper

Honour Killings in the Middle East and Beyond: An Issue of Cultural Patriarchy

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Introduction

In many examples of Western media, women in the Middle East are often portrayed as victims of male abuse and violence against women. Attempts to understand reasons for why people commit such atrocities from a surface perspective are often convoluted and biased undertakings. An example of this is how veiling and honour killings are only seen as “hot topics” or used to attract a lot of publicity in North American and Israeli media (Abdo and Lentin, 2002: 147). To further complicate things, this dialogue has also extended beyond the geographical area of the Middle East and is directed towards the Muslim world as a whole. Specific instances of abuse and of violence against women can range from female genital mutilation, acid throwing, rape, domestic abuse, and various other examples of horrible mistreatment. The focus of this paper however, will be on honour killings; considered to be one of the most extreme forms of violence against women. Even in contemporary times, honour killing is still very prevalent and reasons for doing it are diversified.

The purpose of this paper will be to explore the relationship between honour killings, culture, and patriarchy in the Middle East and the Muslim world. Moreover, it is also important to study why people commit honour killings and how people have reacted to honour killings. It would therefore be appropriate to ask further research questions such as:

- How do researchers and scholars use sociological concepts in regard to honour killings?
- Do these concepts overlap with one another and to what degree?
- What has been done so far to stop and prevent honour killings?

Various pieces of both academic and non-academic literature will be referred to in order to determine the answers to these questions. The sources are varied in nature and range from news articles, journal articles and theoretical essays.

What is “honour”?

In order to understand the nature of honour killings, one must first of course define “honour”. Within a Western context (and more specifically, the English language) honour is typically understood as prestige, reputation, or status. Honour is used to describe someone who is regarded to have a high level of respect from other people or even one who is considered to be privileged. Outside of the Western context, honour can sometimes be perceived on a completely different level. For instance, according to Doğan (2011), the concept of honour is “a sacred value and something more precious to him than even his life. It is an essential element of life. The loss of honor is equal to loss of life; and an ideal man lives for his honor” (Dogan, 2011: 423). This definition is based upon a conceptualization of honour as a catalyst for “Islamic honour killings”. However, Doğan argues that honour killing is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to Islamic cultures. He mentions that honour killings have been known to take place in Western (European) countries such as Spain, Greece and Italy (Doğan, 2011: 426). Furthermore, Doğan mentions how other religious communities such as Copts, Palestinian Christians and Hindus have instances of honour killings as well (Doğan, 2011: 427).

In specific cultural contexts, the meaning of honour changes even further. For example, “face” is defined as “a claimed sense of desired social image in a relational or

group membership encounter situation” (Dorjee et al., 2013: 5). According to Dorjee et al., “face” can be understood within a cultural context that is either individualistic in nature or collectivist in nature. In the collectivist Hindu and Persian cultures, the term for “face” is *izzat*. Honour within these cultures (and other cultures) can be very patriarchal in nature. Male and female honours are diametrically opposed, yet male and familial honours are both tied to female fidelity. Dorjee illustrates this with the statement: “unlike male honor (dynamic), female honor is often viewed as a static attribute” (Dorjee et al., 2013: 6). It should also be noted that in performing an honour killing, the family acknowledges a sense of shame from the surrounding community (i.e. extended family members and friends). If a female family member should “lose” her honour through infidelity, shame would be brought upon the entire family’s collective *izzat*. Since female honour is seen as a static attribute, the only way to reclaim *izzat* is through honour killing.

While *izzat* is an example of how “honour” may have its genesis in cultural norms and traditions, Abdo (2004) examines the concept of honour from both a different geographical area and theoretical standpoint. Perhaps the best place to start is the discourse surrounding the “‘liberality’ of the ‘Occident’ vs. the ‘backwardsness’ of the ‘Orient’” (Hatem, 2003: 90). What is being described here is “feminist Orientalism”, that is, a term “coined to characterize a specific and widespread Western feminist strategy that displaced the oppression of women onto ‘Oriental’ or ‘Islamic’ society and in this way avoided an examination of how ‘Western’ or ‘Christian’ society produced its own forms of gender oppression” (Hatem, 2003: 91). The imposition of Western superiority through this manner allows for women’s rights issues to be altered in very significant

ways. Israel is not excluded from this category as it is often considered at times to be a “part of the West”.

It is here that focus is now shifted onto the Middle East, specifically the State of Israel, and how the state is more closely examined in its role in the dialogue surrounding Arab/Muslim “honour”. Key issues that are highlighted by Abdo are: (1) the role of colonialism, (2) the mechanism of ‘divide and rule’, (3) demystifying the notion of honour killing as part of Islamic culture and religion, and (4) the divide between ‘us/them’ and ‘we/they’ (Abdo, 2004: 62). Similar to Doğan’s perspective, Abdo also argues that honour killings should not be exclusively seen as a Muslim practice. The main point is that culture can be easily manipulated and reproduced by the state in order to maintain hegemonic control. It is not surprising then that honour killings are framed as “part of Arab culture, traditions, religion and customs” (Abdo, 2004: 74). This mindset is very apparent in Israel as the colonial state has been disinterested and inactive against sex crimes and crimes such as honour killings.

Honour has also been described in other literature as a commodity (especially virginity) (Pope, 2004: 106). This definition of honour is discussed by Ruggi (1998) of which it is speculated that honour killings in Palestine originated out of the “history” of Arab society (Ruggi, 1998: 13). Honour (or *‘ard* in Arabic) is considered to be a commodity in Palestinian society which is to be carefully guarded by a close-knit network of family members and friends (Ruggi, 1998: 13). In addition to this, there is the “anti-honour” concept of shame (*‘ayb*), similar to the loss of *izzat* mentioned above by Dorjee. It is therefore particularly important for female members to be aware of their behaviours towards the opposite sex and especially who they are seen with in public.

Romantic relationships outside of marriage can unfortunately have particularly very dire consequences for women. In the context of social relations, honour is defined as “the ideology of the (power) holding group which struggles to define, enlarge and protect patrimony in a competitive area” (Baker, 1999: 165). Honour is used to rationalize killing by making sure that certain behaviours of others are policed by members of the community.

Theoretical models and approaches

In order to understand honour killings in a more objective way, one should look to the various theoretical models and perspectives that have been applied to this subject. Returning to Dorjee et al., honour killing is taken from a “social ecological perspective” (SEP). What must be first understood is that intercultural conflict exists. Intercultural conflict is defined as “the implicit or explicit emotional struggle or frustration between individuals of different cultures over perceived incompatible morals, values, norms, face concerns, goals, scarce resources, processes, and/or outcomes in a communication situation” (Dorjee et al., 2013: 2). Ultimately, these conflicts come from incompatible cultural morals. There are so many factors to take consideration of such as language, religion, worldviews, and ethnic/racial values (Dorjee et al., 2013: 2). Honour killings are a challenge to human moral consciences and this is often regardless of culture or ethnicity. So the question is: How do we address honour killings in such an intercultural context? What is proposed by Dorjee et al. is applying SEP principles so that multiple levels and situations are taken into consideration (Dorjee et al., 2013: 2).

An honour killing for Dorjee et al. is “one that involves killing or murdering a female family member by her own family members and family friends to avenge shame

brought by infidelity or other culturally unacceptable behaviors” (Dorjee et al., 2013: 3). Many honour killings take place in the Middle East, South Asian and Muslim communities in the West. However, honour killings are arguably not unique to these communities or Muslim communities in general. Honour killings also exist in non-Muslim countries as well. It is the deliberate ignorance of this that causes many complications to arise. For example, Abdo’s study found that to date, “killing in the case of honour killing in Israel is not considered a crime” (Abdo, 2004: 74). This is an example of how theoretical knowledge can be used in a malicious way to implement policies and programmes which are intentionally hegemonic. Not only are honour killings not considered crimes, Israel responds to such reports largely by ignoring them (Abdo, 2004: 74). By disguising honour killings as a cultural norm, the State has been able to “reinvent an Arab social structure which the state can depend on politically and socially” (Abdo, 2004: 76).

The best possible approach to examining honour killings therefore is through a meta-narratives approach. The meta-narratives approach “transcends all of the above ideological positions, and emphasizes the importance of understanding the problematic practice from a multilayered, contextual framework” (Dorjee et al., 2013: 4). In other words, the best approach to use is through a promotion of secular ethics. Moral values of actions should be based on its consequences, either as good or bad. In this way, honour killing can be conceptualized as *a/ways* bad because the consequence of someone being murdered far outweighs the “cultural values” that are often used to justify it. Israel identifying itself as a democratic and secular state would do well to implement this theoretical approach and knowledge.

Patriarchy, shame, and community

Another aspect of honour killings is its inherent patriarchal nature. Sometimes this kind of patriarchy is apparent, while other times it is implicitly built into the social system. This section of the paper will deal with how patriarchy is reproduced and enforced through honour killings and how culture and patriarchy overlap with one another in the phenomena of honour killings. Firstly, in states such as Israel, it must be understood that legal structures, state policies and national character are all influenced and “moulded by masculine decisions and patriarchal norms and customs” (Abdo, 2004: 58). Therefore, there is nothing Arab or Muslim about the historical roots of honour killings (or any sexual violence against women). Instead, it is the concept of patriarchy itself which should be more closely examined. For Abdo, “cultural-as-religious plays a very small role, compared to the cultural-as-political, in analysing the phenomenon of “honour killing” (Abdo, 2004: 58). Aside from the institution of the state itself, patriarchal values have a historic root in smaller, more tightly-knit community structures such as tribes and clans. This is exhibited through the fact that honour killings occur almost always at the hands of male relatives such as fathers, brothers, uncles and husbands (Abdo, 2004: 59). As the community progressed together, customs such as controlling women’s bodies became very important. Pope (2004) believes that this level of control “seems motivated by an underlying fear of female sexuality, often perceived to be so potent that girls, if left unsupervised by their male relatives, will immediately stray off the straight path of social convention” (Pope, 2004: 103). In modern times, it can be observed that the state has taken over this role of patriarchal structure in order to reformat and utilize it in a different way. Abdo gives the example of, “in the case of

education, the state has replaced the family in educating and socializing children” (Abdo, 2004: 59). Similarly, the power of the state over the economy also commodifies the bodies of women. Capitalist markets and policies “allow more room to move some ‘private’ and ‘domestic’ issues outside of their confined borders to the public realm, allowing for the negotiation of social and political concerns, including the phenomenon of ‘honour killing’, through state laws, policies, and programmes” (Abdo, 2004: 60).

Aside from control through the state, patriarchal values behind honour killings also exist to maintain this status quo. Baker’s (1999) paper seeks to assess the traditional theoretical concept of male behaviour by “focusing on (a) the control of female behaviour... (b) male feelings of shame when control is lost... and (c) the level of participation by the larger community in enhancing and controlling this shame” (Baker, 1999: 166). Firstly, with regards to controlling female behaviour, the issue of women’s “sexual purity” is not only for reproductive purposes but also serves as a symbol of bonding groups of males and preventing fragmentation (Baker, 1999: 167). In other words, ideal feminine behaviours and attributes lead[s] to a more harmonious society (with the males being in control, of course). In order to maintain this code, control must be exerted over women by whatever means necessary. This would include verbal abuse, wife beatings, and at worst of course, honour killings. It seems as though under this patriarchal system, male status is actually a very fragile thing. At the risk of his female relatives (wives, sisters, etc.) being promiscuous or committing adultery, his reputation within the community can be put on the line.

This brings the focus to the male feelings of shame associated with a loss of control. The sources of shame and dishonour can come from two sources: “first, from

his own actions as a male in the society and second, from the actions of his female relatives” (Baker, 1999: 170). If a woman commits some dishonourable offense, the male must respond accordingly. Otherwise, the dishonour and shame would be intensified against his masculinity if he did not respond. The response to the dishonour on the part of the male is almost always one that is punitive. Such punitive punishments became normal in certain societies. In some societies, “killing a wayward woman is seen as an act of purification for the family, and the one who does the killing ‘wins a grudging respect from the general community’ ” (Baker, 1999: 169). It is through this understanding that it becomes clear that such patriarchal norms and customs negatively affect both the men and women in society. More importantly, it becomes clear how such intense feelings of shame could drive males to execute honour killings. Baker gives a heart wrenching example of this:

“A Middle Eastern case study involving a Jewish family of Yemenite origin follows a similar pattern. When a young wife repeatedly refused to end an extramarital affair, her husband criticized her father in front of others for not controlling his daughter. Her father, a Rabbi, already faced the disapproval of his congregation for his lack of control over his daughter’s behaviour. When the criticism of his inaction became public, he had to respond – and he did so by strangling her.” (Baker, 1999: 170)

The third dimension of honour in Baker’s article is the role of the community in enhancing and controlling this dishonour and shame. As suggested above in the individual male’s responsibility to address dishonour, the community place a major influence in impacting shame in family honour. The key detail is whether or not the transgression reaches the public sphere. If it does not reach the public sphere, the female may not be punished, but if it does, the punishments will most likely have to be carried out. According to Baker, “a number of case studies suggest[s] that the normative

claim of honour often is mixed with social, economic, or political motives” (Baker, 1999: 171). This would make sense as a community with patriarchal values would see that maintaining strict control over its women would produce a good reputation for families and strengthen social bonds in general. Honour is critical for good marriages and once again, a potential bride’s (and the women in the family) behaviour dictates the quality of the family. Conversely, through augmenting a family’s honour, “a murder can *enhance* prestige and is like a planned investment in *improving*, not *maintaining*, social status” (Baker, 1999: 171). However, what about other women in the family? Why do they not intervene in honour killings (or actually do participate in some cases, such as the 2009 Shafia family honour killings in Kingston, Ontario)? One possible reason for this is that “a family’s economic and marital prospects could be at risk” (Baker, 1999: 172). A mother may be investing in the future by protecting her husband and son’s honour so that her well-being may be ensured.

In the rest of Baker’s paper, all of the aspects mentioned above can be transferred into a Western English-speaking context. The difference is that although honour may undergo a transformation in the West, “it still may be understood as an ideology held by those who seek to hold on to patriarchal power in a competitive arena by mandating certain behaviours by others, notable women” (Baker, 1999: 173). For example, in Western states (including Canada) there have been many instances of women being killed as a result of challenging male control. The difference is that those who commit the killing are intimate partners and not male nuclear family members (fathers and sons). In the Western context, male feelings of shame may stem from a feeling that “they are entitled (a social-psychological standard of gratification) to

dominance over their wives, and respond with violence when that dominance is threatened” (Baker, 1999: 176). However, elements from both Western and non-Western notions of patriarchal honour have similar and transferable elements. For example, in both contexts, “a man may be taught that he is the family overseer and guardian and that he has the duty as well as the right to set standards of behaviour and compel women in the household to conform” (Baker, 1999: 177).

Proposed solutions and next steps

The final section of this paper will examine what steps have been taken in order to stop and prevent honour killings in the Middle East and beyond. In a South Asian and Pakistan based study conducted by Bhanbhro et al. (2013), it was concluded that “murders in the name of honour were not solely driven by customs and traditions, but also by a local gender system, a feudal structure, conceptions of manhood and the complicit role of state institutions and law enforcement agencies” (Bhanbhro et al., 2013: 1480). This is similar to the other findings and theoretical approaches mentioned above. However, in Bhanbhro et al.’s implications of their study, they suggest that steps should be taken forward to redefine honour killings as criminal murders, enforce a new legal code, and promote the education of women to achieve equality (Bhanbhro et al., 2013: 1480). In addition to this, honour killings may be prevented “by reducing the influence and interference of feudal lords on state institutions, in particular law enforcement agencies” (Bhanbhro et al., 2013: 1480). It is also suggested that further research be done on the nature and extent of feudal power and its relationship with state institutions in relation to honour related crimes in Pakistan (Bhanbhro et al., 2013: 1480).

In a recent study by Gill and Brah (2013), it was determined that rather than talking purely about culture, “debates on ‘honour’-based violence should explore the intersection of culture with gender and other axes of differentiation and inequality” (Gill and Brah, 2013: 1). What is interesting about their study is that it takes place in the West (Britain) but is still solely focused on honour-based violence with particular attention to the South Asian community in Britain. In particular, the study was based on the murder of Shafiea Ahmed, a Pakistan-British woman killed by her parents in 2012. With this in mind, they conclude that there needs to be a renewed engagement in understanding and combating against the acts of violence against ethnic minority women in Britain. It will require an approach “that takes account of the continuities between different forms of gender-based violence while also addressing the specificity of particular forms, such as [honour-based violence]” (Gill and Brah, 2013: 13). Such practices will only stop if inequalities are identified as part of the issue at stake, even beyond those which are honour-based. The authors conclude that “it will be important to address the harmful effects of patriarchal cultural practices, no matter which culture they are associated with” (Gill and Brah, 2013: 14).

Pope (2004) also suggests similar remedies of empowering women, making them aware of their rights, providing them with access to education and protection, and co-opting young men into battling for greater women’s rights (Pope, 2004: 108). Westerners should also contribute by keeping an open mind and offering advice to all communities where women still suffer routine violence (Pope, 2004: 109). While it is common to portray men and Westerners as instigators of society’s gender

issues/problems, Pope considers them instead as important partners in engaging in holistic feminist dialogue on the issues of violence against women and honour killings.

To conclude this paper, Ruggi's (1998) article written for the *Middle East Report* will be revisited. The geographical location that this article focuses on is in Palestine. Similar to the papers mentioned earlier, Ruggi is able to properly clarify the issue of honour killings within a specific cultural-historical context. This was crucial for trying to find solutions to the problem. The last two sections of the article ("Emergency Assistance" and "Equal Rights") delve into how women's NGOs help abused women with regards to counselling, shelters and healthcare. They also discuss the aims of women's NGOs, highlighting discriminatory legislation, and promoting greater awareness of sex education in Palestinian communities.

Ruggi's article is unique from the other articles reviewed in this paper because it offers a look at how honour killings are dealt with and fought against *by* a community, *within* a community. The main message is that patriarchal culture which propagates honour killings can be changed. The article closes with how the "patriarchal nature of Palestinian society could be undergoing a redefinition due to socioeconomic changes, such as the growth of employment prospects for women, the rising age of marriage, rising educational levels for women and the breakup of the extended family" (Ruggi, 1998: 15). The continued empowerment of women will hopefully one day make honour killings a thing of the past.

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