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Violence and Victimization Against Women in Mukhtar Mai's *In the Name of Honour*

Abstract:

Mukhtar Mai's memoir *In the Name of Honour*, which changed the course of the women's movement in Pakistan, depicts the author's emergence from within the boundaries of local tradition into the realm of globalized debate and activism. Mai's frank, moving and inspiring work is the outcry of a tribal woman gang raped by the orders of the tribal council for an "honour crime" allegedly committed by her 12-year-old brother. The present paper seeks to examine the representation of the plight of Pakistani women in Mukhtar Mai's memoir, *In the Name of Honour*. The paper focuses on the issues of marginality, justice, honour and trauma by taking the case of Mukhtar Mai, a symbol of both courage and victimhood.

Key words: honour, women, victimhood

Mukhtar Mai's memoir *In the Name of Honour*, which changed the course of the women's movement in Pakistan, depicts the author's emergence from within the boundaries of local tradition into the realm of globalized debate and activism. Mai's frank, moving and inspiring work is the outcry of a tribal woman gang raped by the orders of the tribal council for an "honour crime" allegedly committed by her 12-year-old brother. The present paper seeks to examine the representation of the plight of Pakistani women in Mukhtar Mai's memoir, *In the Name of Honour*. The paper focuses on the issues of marginality, justice, honour and trauma by taking the case of Mukhtar Mai, a symbol of both courage and victimhood.

Mukhtar Mai in her memoir brings out honour crimes committed against women. Women are regarded as the custodians of honour. As the honour of men and that of the family depended on women it becomes her duty to safeguard the honour of the family. Women's lives are controlled and their joys are affected as men try to preserve their

honour/manliness. The Ayaan Hirsi Ali Foundation (AHA Foundation) describes the nature of honour violence: Honour violence is a form of violence against women committed with the motive of protecting or regaining the honour of the perpetrator, family or community. Victims of honour violence are targeted because their actual or perceived behaviour is deemed to be shameful or to violate cultural or religious norms. Conduct such as resisting an arranged marriage, seeking a divorce, adopting a Western lifestyle and wearing Western clothing, and having friends of the opposite sex have resulted in honour violence. Honour violence involves systematic control of the victim that escalates over a period of time and may begin at a young age. Honour violence can be perpetrated by one individual or can be a group campaign of harassment and violence committed by an entire family or community. It can take many forms, including verbal/emotional abuse, threats, stalking, harassment, false imprisonment, physical violence, sexual abuse, and homicide.

Mai's memoir narrates several instances of honour crimes and other acts of violence perpetrated against women in her village, Meerwala. Unlike Mai most women victims are powerless to turn their oppression into opportunity. Women are regularly assaulted, beaten, burned with acid, or killed in the 'accidental' explosion of cooking-gas canister. The terrible atrocities against women are a clear indication of the rotten state of the society. Mai asks her country men, "If the honour of my country lies in women, why do men want to rape or kill that honour?" (161). According to the United Nations Population Fund as many as five thousand females are killed worldwide every year as a result of honour killings. Human Rights Watch defines honour crimes as "acts of violence, usually murder, committed by male family members against female family members who are perceived to have brought dishonor upon the family" (Hussain 225).

In *Global Researcher*, Phyllis Chesler remarks, "... 58 percent of killing victims worldwide were murdered for being "too Western". Thus, an honour killing is part of a war waged by one culture against another. The religious and ideological fanaticism that drove Arab men to fly planes into the World Trade Center is the same fanaticism that drove an Iraqi-American Muslim father to run over his daughter with a two-ton jeep because she refused an arranged marriage and wore makeup and jeans" (201).

Mai's brother, Shakur was sodomized by members of the Mastoi tribe. In order to cover up the issue the Mastois falsely accused him of having sexual relations with a Mastoi woman about twice his age. Mai was asked to beg for forgiveness before all the men of the village assembled in a Jirga in front of the Mastois' farm house. When she reached there she was forcibly taken to a nearby stable and gang raped by four Mastoi men. She was then

thrown out of the stable and forced to walk home half naked before hundreds of onlookers. As Germaine Greer claims, “Whatever else we are or may pretend to be, we are our bodies” (29).

Mai says, “For them, a woman is simply an object of possession, honour, or revenge. They marry or rape them according to their conception of tribal pride. They know that a woman humiliated in that way has no other recourse except suicide. They don’t even need to use their weapons. Rape kills her. Rape is the ultimate weapon: it shames the other clan forever” (11). Mai refuses to be silenced by shame and powerfully retaliates against brutality on women ranging from rape and genital mutilation to illiteracy and poverty in her memoir *In the Name of Honour*.

Mai refers to ZafranBibi who was raped by her brother-in-law. She was initially condemned to be stoned to death. But later she was sentenced to prison for “committing” adultery while her rapist is protected by law. Honour crimes, forced marriages and denial of education to girls are propagated in the name of religion though these crimes have nothing to do with Islam. Says Mai, “The form of tribal justice that consists of raping and terrorizing people to maintain control of a village has nothing to do with the Koran. My country, unfortunately, is still governed by barbarous traditions that the state has not managed to dislodge from people’s minds” (140).

Mai’s rape highlighted the abusive nature of tribal councils in the remote areas of Pakistan. The male tribal councils that made the final authoritative decisions often ordered the battering and rape of women to settle disputes. Once in Meerwala, the members of the Jirga resolved a conflict involving murder by ‘attributing’ two little girls aged six and eleven to the victims’ family. The older girl was married to a forty-six-year old man and the younger one to a child of eight “to resolve a stupid murder that began with a quarrel between neighbours over a barking dog!” (126). According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, “the speed with which the Jirga system is expanding makes the need for strengthening the justice system all the more pressing” (3).

The Pakistani government that was initially praised for supporting Mai withdrew their support when Mai gained international prominence. As Nicholas D. Kristof posits in the Foreword, Mukhtar “has had trouble from Pakistan’s leaders ... First, they feel she is displaying Pakistan’s dirty laundry in public, embarrassing her country. Second, they’re resentful that an uneducated peasant woman from a Punjab village is celebrated as a hero, getting more attention than they are” (x). In Harvard Journal of Law and Gender, MaznaHussain cites Musharraff’s remarks: “This has become a money-making concern. A lot

of people say if you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped” (245-6). Musharraf later denied having made such a statement and pointed out that Pakistan should not be singled out on the issue of violence against women.

After almost ten years the Supreme Court upheld the Lahore High Court verdict and acquitted all but one of the accused. The court could not regard Mai’s response as the ideal response of a raped woman because her reactions were different from that of the ideal victim. Though she was raped and thrown out of the stable in front of hundreds of onlookers, the Supreme Court devalued her testimony because no one had actually “seen” the rape. There is a huge gap between women’s formal rights as citizens with equal rights and the way in which they are treated as second-class citizens. Article 25 of the Constitution of Pakistan guaranteed that “All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of the law.” Article 25(2) says, “There shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex alone.” Yet Mai’s rapists were set free. Such light sentences prompt the perpetrators to return to the same locality and threaten the victim and the victim’s family. Examining the situation in Jordan, Hussain points out, “In Jordan, younger relatives are often chosen to carry out honor crimes since juveniles serve shorter prison sentences than adult males, they learn a trade while in prison, and the crime is not noted on a criminal record. These practices deter victims from seeking justice and constitute a virtual blank check for those who commit honor crimes” (235).

Mai’s delay in reporting the incident to the police was also questioned. Rittenhouse refers to Justice Mulk’s view, “... it is quite normal that crimes of rape are not reported promptly. The devastating effects of rape on the victim and her family itself furnish explanation for delay in its reporting. Delay per se would not cast any reflection on the truthfulness of the allegations made in the report” (14). Women who try to seek justice are victimized by the corrupt legal procedures.

In most cases the police themselves were corrupt as is revealed in Mai’s case. The police sided the powerful Mastois and made Mai’s thumbprint on the report they have prepared. Mai says, “The law requires that the police draw up a preliminary investigative report. And it’s always the same thing: they tell the woman, ‘Sign with your thumb, we’ll write it down for you’, and when this report reaches the judge, the culprits are always innocent, and the woman has lied!” (169).

The lack of education is a major cause of the victimization of women. Mai regrets her illiteracy several times in the book and this prompts her to establish schools with the compensation money she got. A Pakistani woman activist tells Mai, “It doesn’t matter what

the women think, because they're not supposed to think at all! They're not allowed to learn to read and write, to find out how the world around them works. That's why illiterate women cannot defend themselves: they know nothing about their rights, and words are put into their mouths to sabotage their revolt" (46).

Mai's memoir exemplifies the various ways in which Muslim women suffer. Though there are a few Muslim women like Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh and the late Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto who take leading roles in the public domain, many are deprived of their basic human rights.

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