

A SOCIALIST-FEMINIST STUDY OF *A GIRL IN THE RIVER: THE PRICE OF FORGIVENESS*

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Abstract

The present paper is a critical analysis of the documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* using a Socialist-Feminist perspective, which covers honor killings in Pakistan. It examines the case of Saba, a young woman who was attempting to be honor killed by her father and uncle, after eloping with her fiancée. The paper provides a textual analysis in the documentary to explore the socio-economic constraints and cultural practices that lead to honor killings, and the way in which women work around these forms of patriarchy. It also examines how media especially documentaries can be used to create awareness and question negative practices in the society. The study will seek to appreciate the motive of honor killing and how the women survive in the patriarchal world. It highlights that legal changes should be made to eliminate impunity of criminals and it proposes societal transformation to stop the crime. In this way, the paper advances the feminist discussion and provides the understanding of how the movie and media can lead to social and legal changes.

Keywords: *Honor Killing, Patriarchal Society, Feminist Theory, Gender Equality, Documentary, Media Awareness, Pakistan, Honor, Women's Survival.*

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1. Introduction

Literature works on highlighting the contemporary problems which are prevalent in society. One among these problems is honor killing. This problem comes under the umbrella of women's oppression in society. Marginalization and subduing of the feminine gender are common in Pakistani society as well. Among literary pieces that are inscribed, performed, or made to watch, documentaries occupy a prominent position. The Oscar-winning documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* is a significant work that highlights the suppression of women in the Pakistani context.

The documentary is based on the real story of a girl named Saba, who was intimidated by her uncle and father because she eloped with her fiancé, Qaisar, and married him. The whole story revolves around honor killing, a heinous social evil that is protected by the social norms and customs of society. However, the documentary also portrays the exemplary courage of the protagonist, Saba, who managed to reach a safe destination and then contacted the nearby police station.

Socialist feminism emerged in the 1960s as an offshoot of feminism. The theory is inspired by Marxism and feminism. Looking back at the heady days of feminism's "second wave" in the United States, it is distressing to acknowledge that the movement's revolutionary momentum has faded, while key aspects of liberal feminism have been incorporated into the ruling class agenda. Liberal feminist ideas have been mobilized to support various neo-liberal initiatives, including austerity, imperial war, and structural adjustment. Johanna Brenner argues that the twenty-first century is marked by crisis and tension due to its association with class distinction and the dominance of the capitalist economy (21st Century Socialist Feminism).

In relation to the documentary and the life of Saba, this study is conducted to examine—rather relate—the social and financial reasons behind honor killings, with reference to Saba's life and family background.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Gender inequality, improper interpretation, and lack of awareness of man-made laws as well as divine laws have led to the epidemic of honor killings. Pakistani society is largely either in favor of honor killing or remains silent about it. In both cases, such attitudes promote violence and sustain the practice of honor killing. *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* retells the story of Saba and becomes a strong voice against honor killing, thereby addressing this grave issue.

However, speaking against the horrific crime of honor killing is often discouraged due to public shaming and social pressure. This study, therefore, addresses the potential of film and documentary as effective media for highlighting and challenging the social issue of honor killing, which is otherwise difficult to address. It is important to raise awareness among the masses and change public perception so that honor killing is no longer seen as an acceptable practice but is recognized as an unacceptable social crime.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the reasons behind honor killings with reference to *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*.
2. To investigate the survival process of women within a patriarchal society as reflected in *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*.

1.3. Research Questions

1. What are the reasons behind honor killings in relation to *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*?
2. How does the feminine gender survive in a patriarchal society as mirrored in *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study aims to spread awareness about gender equity through proper interpretation of religious teachings and human laws. It seeks to contribute to the eradication of the social evil of honor killing in Pakistani society. Academically, the study holds significance as it contributes to existing research in the field of gender studies, feminism, and media representation.

2.Literature Review

Asfandiyar Warraich is of the view that honor killing is social and traditional evil, having its roots in our customs, norms. By exemplifying the laws passed by legislation and epitomizing different reports of the Human Rights Commission Report of Pakistan, whereby he catered the data of killings in the name of honor in 2013, 14 and 15, 869, 1000 and 1096, he quelled the requirement of data in relation to cease honor killings, and put forth to reimagination of the obsolete conception honor killing. He suggested that their need of recognition of honor killing on the part of the security agencies as a dishonor to the state; while, general awareness among the masses shall also be instigated for educating them how gruesome the evil practice is and what effects it has on society. (In the Name of Honor killing. DAWN. December 2017)

In an Editorial of the newspaper, Dawn, an article published in the name of Another Honor killing, the brutal incidents of honor killings were reported and collectively examined. The article put forth the perspective of enactment of an action or the robust policies of the country's courts against the local Jirga System that works to provide verdicts on the basis of conservative norms and unauthentic and unwritten rules and regulations. (Dawn, November, 29 2017)

Quoting different Ulemas and highly qualified theologians, Nisar Ahmad has explained the scenario, in which two incidents in Karachi in which a man and woman were killed in the name of honor, vis-à-vis the explanation Islamic perspectives; and remarked that the Sharia court and the top court along with the Ulema council of Pakistan shall abandon the exercise of

the macabre crime in the name of traditions and customs which are practiced by the Jirga system. (Honor killings- the Dark side of Hazara. Dawn. July 23, 2017)

Nadia Agha, particularizing Women and citing the reports of Human Rights Commission Reports of the last three years and the World Economic Forum report about Gender Gap 2016, commented that women, in Pakistan, had been victim of violence from men. Part of the reason, she explained, is the attitudes and beliefs of the common masses in relation to women. The spying culture in patriarchal society and the institutional gap within the working of the system are the main reasons behind women being prone to violence. (In honor's name. Dawn, January, 04, 2017)

Arif Hassan, accusing the traditional and conservative attitudes behind the honor killings. The statistics that he provided has shown that the women, in 2016, are changing the socio-cultural and socio-political and socio-economical status of Pakistan. According to him, the age for marriage is between 16 to 24, and in the census of 1961, the ratio of the marriage of women and men was 66.7 and 23.38, respectively. However, in the census, as he reported, during 1998 and 2016 was 17pc women and 7 pc men. This clampdown in the ratio shows how Pakistan's trends are changing. (Honor Killings, August 07, 2016)

Rafia Zakaria opined that Qandeel Baloch and after that the case of Samia Shahid- the one who was duped and then killed by her family as she divorced the husband chosen by her family and married a British- are the cases that need extreme attention from the administration and judiciary of Pakistani polity. Thus, the families behind these incidents convey the patriarchal and cultural restriction and domination that are prevailing in the society. (Other Honor Killings. Dawn. 03 August, 2016)

Sharyar Nabi, while putting forth the reports of the honor killings in Pakistan and relating them with the Oscar Award, won by Sharmeen Obaidi because of her

documentary, *A Girl in the river: the Price of Forgiveness*, has explained the attitudes of the Pakistani people towards the Award and displaying the evil picture in the international community. He argues that unless strong actions are taken against the perpetrators of the heinous crime, the honor crimes shall be displayed through documentaries and cinematic art. (Friday Times. 03 march, 2014)

Till now, the documentary is not explored under the umbrella of Socialist-Feminist perspective. This research will study the documentary from the perspective of Social Feminism in order to represent and address the nuisance of honor killing and establish the power of media of film and documentary in curbing these nuisances.

3. Research Methodology

The paper uses textual analysis of the documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* to answer the research questions and discuss the existence of honor killings under the theory of Social Feminism. The primary data is directly taken out of the documentary, and it is focused on the references and story offered in the text, whereas the secondary data is obtained out of different articles in *Dawn* newspaper, which provide extra information on the socio-cultural context of honor killings. The study is meant to look into the root cause of honor killings especially in connection to the economic and social causes of these killings. Moreover, it discusses how women survive in the face of extreme physical violence, torture, and oppression in society. Textual analysis of the documentary, as well as the incidences narrated, is analyzed through the prism of Social Feminism in a bid to explain the reasons that lead to honor killings and how women survive in a patriarchal society where conservative sentiments are entrenched.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The award-winning documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* is the story written by Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, which narrates the powerful and tragic story of Saba, an 18-year-old girl living in Gujranwala, Pakistan. Saba narrates a heart-rending story of honor killing attempt by her father and uncle who shot her and threw her body into a river because they felt that her decision to marry the man of her choice had offended the family. The film is a true eye-opener on the horrors of honor killings in Pakistan whereby every year thousands of women and girls are slaughtered in the name of family honor or honor. Although the documentary is about the survival of Saba and her strength in seeking justice, it also illuminates on the socio-cultural and legal system that encourages such crimes. This discussion will also examine the multiple layers of the movie based on the character of survival of Saba, the sociopolitical environment as well as the fundamental

weaknesses within the legal system of Pakistan which all lead to the high rate of honor killings.

4.1. Saba's Journey of Survival

The story of Saba is very tragic and motivating. Her sin was that of risking to decide on her own suitor in the world where women are usually supposed to follow the family deals and uphold the family honor by their behaviors. Saba fell in love with Qaisar, with whom she had known four years and she was engaged to him. But her family had different plans on her. They wished her to get married to another man who was more prosperous and able to give her a better future in terms of financial background. Saba turned this arrangement down and got married to Qaisar and this made her father and uncle feel that their honor was at stake. It was this feeling of dishonor which caused a would-be murder on the score of family honor.

The greatest thing about this tragic story is the fact that Saba survived. Her father and uncle shot her in the face and the hand and threw her into a river to die. Nevertheless, by miracles, Saba was able to hold on to the bushes on the riverbank, come back to her senses and swim to safety. She had survived by a miracle and she owed it to the disloyalty of the Quranic oaths that her father and uncle had sworn to defend her. *"God saved me, because they have cheated on Quran,"*. This quote is echoed by the very strong implication of God coming in and the moral and spiritual hypocrisy of the people who perpetrate the crime.

The feeling of the story of Saba is a very emotional one to be understood in the documentary as we see how she fights to survive and her consistency even when the odds are against her. Her bravery to live through a violent assault is noble, but it is lost in the society set-up that enabled the violence in the first place. The documentary demonstrates that honor is an abstract concept and it is used by the patriarchal order to perpetrate violence against women. Although Saba survived, her journey was not complete with the death escape. The actual struggle was yet to commence.

4.2. Social and Cultural Background of Honor Killings.

In patriarchal societies, honor killings have a very strong root and Pakistan is no exception. The idea of honor, especially in the country, is mostly associated with the domination of the sexuality and conduct of women. Women are supposed to be the guardians of family honor and any deviating to this fact like having a choice of a partner or pursuing education or even engaging in the life of the world can be considered to be a betrayal of the family. This honor has become an inherent part of the collective consciousness to the point that it is used as an excuse to commit violence and murder. In

the case of Saba, her action of being a choice of her own was regarded as an offense against the honor of her family and she was nearly death-punished.

The most troubling aspect of the case involving Saba is not just the violence that she has suffered, but the reason that supports it. Her father and uncle who shot and left Saba to die insisted on being acting in self-defense of family honor. This misguided pride, in which violence is one way of preserving the social position, displays the poisonous cultural values that support honor killings. When questioned by Saba about the act, his father explained the attempt to murder by the fact that *“these girls are my responsibility. I must feed and keep them safe. In their turn, they are not supposed to play with the family pride. That’s an unforgivable sin.”* This argument is an indicator of the patriarchal thought process of women being property that needs to be controlled and defended and any deviation to this perceived ownership would attract death.

This cultural attitude is masterfully depicted in the documentary that reveals the strong misogyny that drives the behavior of such people as the father and uncle of Saba. It also states the greater societal tolerance of such practices. Honor killings are perceived to be crimes in most cases, and they are taken to be the necessary things to safeguard family honor. This culture of honor killing women under the guise of honor is widespread in most societies, and Pakistan is one of the countries where it is the most widespread. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan indicated that more than 1,000 women and girls die every year at the hands of honor killers; and the criminals frequently escape with impunity.

4.3. The Loopholes in the Law and the Irresponsibility.

The problematic nature of the legal system in Pakistan enabling even the perpetrators of honor killing to escape is one of the most disturbing facts about the documentary. The laws in the country are founded on the Islamic principles and give an escape path to the perpetrators of justice. According to the law, honor killings are regarded as personal issues and the family of the victim can pardon the offender. In case the victim does not die, she is coerced to forgive her attackers or the family may forgive her. This legal loophole helps to create an atmosphere in which honor killers are usually not punished and responsible of their acts.

The case of Saba is one of the best illustrations of the inability of the legal system to defend women and punish the culprits. When Saba survived the attempted murder, she needed justice, where she wished that her father and uncle were punished because of their actions. But according to the laws of Pakistan, it was a domestic issue in the family, and the family of Saba was pressurized to forgive the rapists. This led to the freeing of Saba father and uncle who had not been punished because of their wrongdoing. The Islamic law

of forgiveness grounded on the legal concept of forgiveness has been misapplied and used to give impunity to the wrongdoers. This is a loophole in the sense that, even when Saba, as the case study, reported, the perpetrators were left free to repeat the cycle of violence.

The movie brings out the terrifying effects of such a legal system to the victims of honor killings. According to cultural and social requirements, Saba was compelled by her family to forgive those who raped her by the press, although her trauma and unfairness were enormous. Even in her own description, Saba reflects on how this affected her emotionally: *"I forgave my father and uncle in the name of my family and community. Yet never shall I forgive them with my entire heart. I leave my justice to Allah."* This is because this statement depicts the internal war that many victims of honor killings go through, they are pressurized to forgive their assailants to maintain unity in the family and prevent any additional violence. It also brings out the strong sense of betrayal that the victims of honor killings are subjected to when law does not serve the case.

4.4. The contribution of Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy towards creating awareness.

The documentary by Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy is a strong mechanism of awareness creation around the problem of honor killings and legal change that should be brought about in Pakistan. The movie does not only reveal the intimate life of Saba, but also sheds light on the greater societal and cultural powers that make such violence possible. The emotional focus of the story as directed by Obaid-Chinoy gives the viewer a critical facet in which to perceive the problem of honor killings. Her movie illuminates on hypocrisy and injustice of a system in which men can murder women in the name of honor and get away with this act.

The documentary is also a call to action of reforming the legal system in Pakistan. Obaid-Chinoy shows through the narration of Saba how the issue of legal loopholes that enable honor killers to escape punishment is very critical and requires an immediate solution. The movie shows that the idea of forgiveness has been abused by people to spread the cycle of violence and the legal system has not done enough to help the women to avoid these atrocities. Following the documentary, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared that he will reform the Pakistani laws to do away with the concept of forgiveness in honor killings. Although this is a move in the right direction, it is yet to be established whether these reforms will be implemented fully or they will prove to be effective in reducing honor killings.

4.5. Honor Killings: The Political and Religious Aspects

The problem of honor killings in Pakistan is not only a legal or cultural problem; but it is also very political and religious. Religious and cultural leaders tend to endorse honor killings, as they use their power to advance the notion that women bodies belong to men and that the ownership should not be infringed. In defending his actions, Saba argued that he was doing so under religious practices by indicating that he was defending the family honour. Nonetheless, the Quran does not condone such violence, and the action of Saba father is a complete sham of the Islamic teachings.

This is one of the primary reasons as to why honor killings continue to be practiced in Pakistan. Religious authorities and conservatives tend to ruin their power to create patriarchal dominance over the lives of women and advance the notion that violence against women was permissible in some situations. Such understanding of Islam has resulted in popularization of honor killings in not only in Pakistan but also in other regions of the Muslim world. It is important to refute these interpretations and instigate a more progressive and fair interpretation of Islam that would respect women rights and dignity.

Honor killings also have high political implications. The Pakistani government has not succeeded in ensuring that this problem is effectively addressed and this has helped such crimes to persist. The intention of the prime minister to undertake reform is a good move but it is evident that there is a need to have a wider cultural change to fight the honor killings. This change should not only be legal but also a change in societies towards women and their rights. Until these changes take place, the cycle of violence will go on and women such as Saba will still be at risk.

A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness is a strong and dramatic documentary that throws light into the situation of honor killing in Pakistan. The film reveals the cultural, legal, and political conditions in which such violence is possible through the character of Saba. The fact that Saba was able to survive and that she was brave enough to defend herself is motivational, yet the case also shows how corrupt the Pakistani system of laws is and how the principles upheld by the society support violence toward women. The documentary is also an appeal to change the law and change the culture that appreciates the rights and the dignity of women. The movie by Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy can transform things, yet, it is upon the society and the government to work towards the cause and make sure that honor killings are no longer practiced and women like Saba are not subjected to the victimization in the guise of honor.

5. Conclusion

More than 1,000 women and girls in Pakistan die each year as a result of honor killings, a very tragic situation, which is caused by the strong belief in the culture of such practices, and the fact that the laws in the country do not provide a way of holding the culprits responsible. Such victims be they daughters or mothers are usually murdered on some petty accusations or suspicions like going against expectations or dishonor in the family. In 2013/ 2014, the Human Rights Commission noted that there were 1,005 honor killings and this was 15 percent higher than in the previous year. According to the law, honor crimes are now considered as crimes against the person and not the state since the victim or her family has the choice to forgive the criminal. This has led to a culture of impunity since the murderers can be forgiven by their families. This impunity is what will make honor killings decrease. Legal change, as the story of Saba points out and as Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy notes, is how real change can be achieved, and there exists hope that the government of Pakistan will make the changes to the laws and this will give the media the power to bring legal and societal change.

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