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Reading Amir H. Jafri: Honour Killing and Feminism

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Abstract:

The paper would see the research within the extension of the work done in *Honor Killing: Dilemma, Ritual, and Understanding* by Amir H. Jafri. The men resort to honor killings in Pakistan and analyze the discourse that concerns such killings taking into consideration the cultural, religious, historical, and political reasons. In light of this text, an attempt would be made to know the concept of dreaded honor killing from socio-cultural and feminist perspective. These are proposed to be analyzed in the context of the high profile killing of Samia Sarwar in Pakistan. The agenda of feminists is to end all kinds of discriminations against women and have a better place for them to live. Honor killing is an extreme form of violence perpetrated against women in Pakistan and in many other Middle East countries. It is linked with the rituals and customs of these countries. Attempts made by women to raise their voice against such killings and discrimination have met with a strong backlash by men who are opposed to women seeking their rights. The honor killing of Samia Sarwar in Pakistan is a pointer towards the discrimination against women for seeking a divorce from an abusive husband. This discrimination against women is also carried forward in their way of dressing and moving out of their houses for jobs and education. An educated class of women has acquired the agency to interrupt the discourse that puts hurdles in their path to end the oppression that they face in their day-to-day lives. These women have to raise their voice not only for themselves but also for those who go on to silently face the battering and deprivations. They have to come forward, raise

their issues, expose the falsehood that is being spread in the name of honor, culture, and traditions. Women can become agents of change in society through proper education and gainful employment to empower on women's position in society.

Keywords: Honor killing, backlash, discrimination, agency, interrupt.

Honor killing is an extreme form of violence perpetrated against women in Pakistan and in many other Middle East countries. It is linked with the rituals and customs of these countries. Attempts made by women to raise their voice against such killings and discrimination have met with a strong backlash by men who are opposed to women seeking their rights. The honor killing of Samia Sarwar in Pakistan is a pointer towards the discrimination against women for seeking a divorce from an abusive husband. This discrimination against women is also carried forward in their way of dressing and moving out of their houses for jobs and education. An educated class of women has acquired the agency to interrupt the discourse that puts hurdles in their path to end the oppression that they face in their day-to-day lives. These women have to raise their voice not only for themselves but also for those who go on to silently face the battering and deprivations. They have to come forward, raise their issues, expose the falsehood that is being spread in the name of honor, culture, and traditions. Women can become agents of change in society through proper education and gainful employment to empower on women's position in society. The paper would see the research within the extension of the work done in *Honor Killing: Dilemma, Ritual, and Understanding* by Amir H. Jafri. The men resort to honor killings in Pakistan and analyze the discourse that concerns such killings taking into consideration the cultural, religious, historical, and political reasons. In light of this text, an attempt would be made to know the concept of dreaded honor killing from socio-cultural and feminist perspective. These are proposed to be analyzed in the context of the high profile killing of Samia Sarwar in Pakistan. The agenda of feminists is to end all kinds of discriminations against women and have a better place for them to live.

The feminists and human rights activists have argued that there cannot be extenuating circumstances which call for violence or murder of innocent women. Women need to have a better place to live where they do not have the fear of being beaten up or killed simply for being women without any rights. The feminist theorist Toril Moi recounts that "we do not have to believe that the word 'woman' always carries heavy metaphysical baggage. If I am right about

this, then it follows that an anti-essentialist feminism may very well claim that the point of feminism is to make the world a better place for women without being caught in the slightest theoretical contradictions” (Moi 10). On the contrary, violence against women is being witnessed in many different forms worldwide. There has been a tendency of a section of society to continue with the tradition of oppressing women.

Amongst the various forms of violence, honor killings are carried out in many countries for the past many years. The paper highlights discrimination against women in Pakistan particularly with reference to the text written by Amir Jafri wherein he has attempted to understand the rituals and customs that create a dilemma for men to take the recourse to murder their female relatives for cleansing the family honor. In this context, he has referred to an interview with Shamsa Jaagir, human rights activist in Pakistan, who has asserted:

“That for the oppressive elements in the society it does not matter how they keep the customs intact. They will do it with whatever means are available: Here if it suits them they will use religion for oppression. Otherwise they use social norms. It does not matter what you call it. I mean Islam does not allow honor killing. Now it is social. I mean, even a murder is called something like an honorable thing to do” (AJ 99).

Some men do not want women to rise and be treated as equals with them. They justify violence against women in the name of their social traditions and religion. Nishat Amber, in an article, elaborates that no rational tradition or religion supports violence against women and such killing of women cannot be justified on any pretext:

“Incidentally, the Supreme God in all religions is always envisioned as a male. Scriptures are mostly written and interpreted by men who tweak and translate them to suit their own vision of the desirable social-order and preferable gender-dynamics in the same. Religious organisations, spiritual and temporal, are dominated by men and are largely off-limits for women though it is commonly acknowledged that the latter tend to be more religiously and morally inclined and possess the qualities needed for the discharge of duties that these organisations entail.” (Source: Internet).

The famous feminist theorist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Spalding have outlined that “History shows, too, that the moral degradation of women is due more to theological superstitions than to all other influences together” (Stanton, Spalding 389-90). They have however clarified that it is essential that society should shed its belief on theological superstition.

Women's advancement does not depend on any religion but an attempt should be made to achieve it on the basis of progress made in commerce, science, art, invention, and the dissemination of knowledge.

The endeavor of women to move ahead in life by effectively utilizing the various advancements has met with a backlash from men. Jafri has referred to a report of Amnesty International which draws attention to the fact that there is a proportional link between honor killings and women demanding their rights.

“However, according to a report by Amnesty International (1999), if women begin to assert their rights they face more repression and punishment; thus the curve of honor killing has risen parallel to the rise of awareness of rights...human rights activists and feminists argue that cultures are not static but continually changing- increasing so with the ongoing communication revolution- in response to interactions with other cultures and demands of the modern age. Traditions, in their view, may have emphasized certain norms in the past, but this does not preclude tradition being shaped by new realities” (AJ 7-8).

Whereas the feminists celebrate the greater autonomy and progress, the anti-feminists have also grouped to oppose the rights of women, arguing against these. The progress made by women in various fields in the Middle-East and South-Asian countries has also met with resistance from the power holding group represented by patriarchy. It considers greater autonomy for women as a direct attack on its hegemony.

Jafri has alluded to the murder of Samia Sarwar as a pointer towards the negative aspect of divorce in Pakistani society. In these societies, various rules and norms are prescribed for women. Samia's seeking a divorce from her abusive husband was not taken kindly by her husband's family and also her parental family. Jafri considers that in such traditional societies, which support collectivist culture, decisions about marriages and divorce are considered to be the fiefdom of parents, or more specifically males despite laws to the contrary. He says that “In collectivistic cultures, marriages are arrangements between families and divorce can potentially trigger generational feuds. For the sake of their family honor, Samia's parents were resisting the idea of divorce. Samia had been separated from her allegedly abusive husband for a couple of years and had been desperately trying to get a divorce at the time of the incident” (AJ 92). Although the law allows for women seeking a divorce, the traditionalist mindset of the society is

opposed to this concept. Samia's crime was seeking a divorce from an abusive husband. Jafri tells that "Samia was killed because she was alleged to have brought shame to their family and tradition...Samia had been seeking a divorce from her husband, Imran, a medical doctor, on grounds of alleged domestic violence and his habitual drug abuse. Having failed to get the divorce through family deliberations, she had sought help from lawyers, Hina Jilani and Ashma Jahangir, sisters and well-known human rights advocates, who also ran a shelter for battered women" (AJ 1). This decision of Samia to approach the court against the decision of her family was considered to be against the time-bound honor of the family, which was bound by the culture of traditionalism. For this, she had to pay the price with her life. The support of parents may have saved Samia. This also brings about the positive impact of women defying the time-bound culture of honor and traditions and seeking a divorce from their abusive husbands. The above aspects further highlight the prevalence of a culture in conservative societies that consider women seeking divorce a taboo. Women are being punished both by their husbands and their families as well as by their parental family for seeking a divorce. Talking about divorce as taboo in traditional societies, Tas-Cifcy highlights:

"Irrespective of the real cause of divorce, societies and families tend to blame women for it. It is considered the women's fault, which has a negative effect on the family's honor and reputation. Divorce in these societies prove the failure of the woman to fulfill her duties as a wife. When she returns to her parental family, she may not be treated well by her relatives. Both parents and brothers may become stricter towards the divorced woman because of her misbehavior as a result of her divorce and the subsequent tarnishing of her family's honor. Her brothers especially may become stricter and may not hesitate to use physical violence against her to discipline her...She must from then on be very careful with her behavior, as she can easily cause more damage to her family's honor and reputation." (Source: Internet).

Feminists have argued that the right to divorce should be available to women also as to men and there cannot be any discrimination on this issue. Samia had stood firm in her resolve to divorce her incompetent and abusive husband and thereby showed the way to other women also.

In addition to norms that impose restrictions on women to seek a divorce, the traditions and culture of conservative societies in Pakistan prescribe certain discriminatory norms related to dress and staying indoor for women. Jafri mentions:

“Among the behavioral expectations that the society has from the women and one that is hammered in by the clergy with sermons is the concept of *chadar and chaar devaari* (the veil and the four walls)...The veil is self-effacing to the extent that it renders the veiled anonymous if not altogether erased. Women’s presence in male preserves, and the concomitant acknowledgment of their presence, signifies encroachment on male privileges. Such attitudes are still endemic in various societies including some with majority Muslim populations. For men, guarding this privilege of space and ownership is a part of their sense of honor. Sometimes they guard it by spilling blood” (AJ 60-61).

The concept of the veil for women is an important consideration that is linked to the traditions of many societies. With more education and an increased share in jobs, more women are appearing in public. Women’s desire to go out for a job and earn a livelihood has also been viewed negatively and against the norms of traditional societies. Talking about the importance of veil, Phil and Julie Parshall outline:

“Quranic data regarding the dressing of women is sparse, the most widely quoted Scripture on the subject is Surah (chapter) 24:31, which states, “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands’ fathers, or their sons or their husbands’ sons, or their brothers or their brothers’ sons or sisters’ sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, or children who know naught of women’s nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment” (Parshalls 57).

The way of dressing of women- *the veil and burqa*, has been an important and controversial issue in the Muslim world as its continuance represented subjugation and removal represented freedom for women. Regarding the concept of keeping women indoors, Paulusson adds that “Girls and women had to live under strong moral rules, were denied leisure time and were often kept indoors” (Paulusson 8). Way of dress and remaining away from public gaze are considered as part of modest behavior by women in traditional societies. These are linked with the control of women's sexuality.

The discrimination against women in way of dressing, or going out for jobs, or even in seeking a divorce from their abusive husbands has been opposed by an educated class of women.

Based on interviews with some women and some articles, Jafri had referred to an educated class of women in Pakistan such as professors, writers, lawyers, and activists, who have raised their voice for the marginalized section of women. He mentions that “As subalterns, these women have trained themselves to be versed in the language of the oppressors; they have acquired the agency and are retaliating by public demonstrations, voicing their views on the national media, and taking up cudgels in law courts” (AJ 117). Here, the task of speaking against customs and traditions which promote violence on women has been taken up by women who have got proper formal education and understand the law and other issues of Pakistani politics well. Jafri has compared this educated class of women who have acquired the agency to interrupt the discourse with those who are still being oppressed and marginalized. He also refers to a simple 14-years old Sindhi girl who in her poem expresses her fear of being potentially declared a *kari* (blackened woman). “This example of the tactical strain of Pakistani feminism was written by this Sindhi girl who epitomizes the marginalized and brutalized...In contrast to her fellow feminists (and natural allies), she is innocent of rhetorical skills and legal expertise – the ways of the world...She is representative of an oral culture, without access to the written word...” (AJ 118-19). She represents the illiterate women, particularly in tribal and rural areas, who have led a life of non-existence and total domination by their male relatives. They are the ones brutally beaten up and even killed for not conforming to the social norms. Here, Jafri refers to two faces of women in Pakistan, one represented by the educated class who are aware of their rights and seek to obtain these rights by raising their voice. The subtle message here is that those who raise their voice get all the benefits while those who continue to suffer silently have to go on enduring the battering and deprivations. If women stay silent, they will be pushed back into oblivion. They have to come forward, raise their issues, expose the falsehood that is being spread in the name of honor, culture, and traditions. Wilson in an article in *The Guardian* exhorts women to raise their voices and demand their rights. She says “Girls and young women have been silent for a long time and it is time for us to speak up. No one can do it for us. We must speak for ourselves.” (Source: Internet). Women are being suppressed in the name of old traditions and culture. They are being denied their rightful place in society. To come out of this tyranny, they cannot rely on anyone. They have to raise their voice for themselves, as also for others who are under extreme conditions of marginalization. Unless and until they speak out openly and loudly nobody will

hear them. For this, women need to be educated so that they acquire an 'agency' to raise their voices.

Referring to various articles, interviews and speeches and books by feminists, Jafri has referred to certain concepts in feminist literature:

"I was repeatedly reminded of the concept of 'agency' and 'interruption' in Western feminist literature...a recurrent theme in the representative feminist discourse is that honor killing and other forms of extreme violence are a manifestation of the structurally imposed inequities forced on the women as a gender group. This strand of feminism in Pakistan advocates agency for the women and attempts to interrupt the hegemonic discourses in the country in order to remove the constraints and to facilitate the new roles for women and new modes of relationship between men and women... Acquiring agency is a process of developing a capacity to exercise will, to determine the shape of one's own life, and to some extent, play a role in shaping of one's culture. Interruption is like asserting, one is mindful of one's self-respect and intellectual self-regard" (AJ 103-05).

Jafri wants to drive home the point that women can become agents through proper education and only then will they be able to effectively interrupt the oppressive conversation and discourse on women's position in society. Many women like Samia, her lawyers, and others have now started to 'interrupt' the discourse in Pakistan, which is focused on specific roles for women as prescribed by society. Through education and experience, they have acquired the 'agency' to understand the disadvantageous position into which they are being forced by their male relatives. Kabeer in his article mentions:

"Each of the three 'resources' implied by these indicators - education, employment, and political participation - is considered essential to the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment...The concept of empowerment can be explored through three closely interrelated dimensions: agency, resources, and achievements. Agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect. It is hence central to the concept of empowerment. Resources are the medium through which agency is exercised; and achievements refer to the outcomes of agency...Resources and agency make up people's capabilities: that is, their potential for living the lives they want. The term 'achievements' refers to the extent to which this potential is realized or fails to be realized; that is, to the outcomes of people's efforts. In relation to empowerment, achievements

have been considered in terms of both the agency exercised and its consequences” (Kabeer 13- 14).

For acquiring ‘agency’ to interrupt the national discourse on their rights, women need to educate themselves, get gainful employment, and participate in politics. Only by acquiring agency, can the women be empowered and gender equality achieved. One of the foremost considerations for bringing equality between men and women is that men must act to change themselves. They should facilitate to bring about a change where women are granted their rightful place in society. Jafri has mentioned that:

“In modern-day Pakistan, women have to be granted their due dignity and rights in the light of fresh interpretations (*ijtihad*) of the sacred texts. Additionally, for these ends, men have to make adjustments in their social roles and their expectations from women. In due course, they need to be culturally trained to come to terms with a view of masculinity that is more in tune with the emerging global ethos and not mired in ancient tribal myths...Men must be infused with a less hegemonic and more harmonic vision of masculinity” (AJ 142).

With greater awareness and tougher laws that are being implemented strictly and earnestly, the changes are bound to take place at a much faster pace. Ruxton asserts that the importance of engaging men to find solutions for gender inequality has become a commonly recognized issue now:

“At the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women, the *Beijing Declaration* committed participating governments to ‘encourage men to participate fully in all actions towards equality.’ Five years later, at its twenty-third special session (‘Beijing +5’), the UN General Assembly went on to emphasize that ‘men must involve themselves and take joint responsibility with women for the promotion of gender equality.’ Consolidating these commitments, one of the two major themes addressed at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in its 48th session in March 2004 was ‘The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality’ (Ruxton 3-4).

For achieving gender equality, the focus now is on the involvement of both men and women. The involvement of men is all the more important to bring about a change in the mindset of men and prepare them to set aside the resistance to accept and become a catalyst in accelerating the change. This will help to end the exploitation of women.

Many feminists have staged their war against exploitation by men in the form of opening shelter homes for women who have been driven away from their homes by their families. Men have continued to oppose these shelter homes for battered women by equating them with centers that promote immorality. Speaking against the women shelters in Parliament, Senator Rehman was quoted by Jafri as saying “That place (the women’s shelter) is a den of prostitution” (AJ 93). This shows men’s detest for places where women can raise their voice against the tyranny experienced by them in everyday life. Women turn to these shelter homes for safety and security from violence. Besides, the legal, psychological, academic needs of the battered women are being met by many of these shelter homes. Men consider these shelter homes as a means of reducing their authority. Even Samia Sarwar, who did not get support for getting a divorce, both by her family and in-laws, had to take refuge in such a shelter home. This has been referred to by Jafri also. “Having failed to get the divorce through family deliberations, she had sought help from lawyers, Hina Jilani and Ashma Jahangir, sisters and well-known human rights advocates, who also ran a shelter for battered women” (AJ xiii). Several hapless women who are shunned by their family and have nowhere to go have turned to these shelter homes, which have tried to give them a new home and a voice. These centres for women have in one way or another provided a voice to many women who have otherwise continued to suffer. Although these centres have their shortcomings yet they have provided a breathing space to many battered women who are on the run from their families and in-laws, for their so-called crime of breaching the family honor. The centres which are being managed in the right earnest have provided livelihood opportunities to many women besides protection from their families. Haj-Yahia and Cohen have elaborated on the importance of shelter homes for women.

“In crisis situations, when their lives are in danger and they lack sufficient protection and support, battered women are often forced to request assistance from shelters, among other services. Shelters for battered women usually provide protection and serve as a hiding place. They are usually a last resort when women are in danger and need immediate physical protection. The services provided by shelters for battered women include, among others, physical protection and refuge for the woman and her children, support and reinforcement for the woman and her children, preparation for her return to the community, and enrichment programs...In addition to bolstering the battered woman’s self image and helping her to overcome her fear, anxiety, and other reactions that are

aroused by her partner's violence, shelters offer a supportive social atmosphere in which the women can develop positive relations with each other" (Haj-Yahia, Cohen 95)

Despite several shortcomings, financial crunch and other drawbacks, these shelter homes for women have provided a ray of hope to many battered women. In addition to helping them from coming out of the shock of physical and mental abuse, it helps them to cope up with the future life.

Jafri brings out that the support provided to the battered women by these shelter homes and other women has not been seen positively by men in traditional societies. Many women who support and fight for the cause of equal rights are defamed by men. They accuse them of trying to bring immorality in their culture. In Samia Sarwar's case, the two women lawyers had to face this reaction as covered by Jafri:

"The criminal case brought against the perpetrators of the killing triggered bitter religio-tribal agitation organized by certain groups against the lawyers Jilani and Jahangir. In an ironic and seemingly absurd twist, the agitators called for the death of the two advocates for corrupting their women by encouraging them to rebel against tribal customs...some senators denounced the two activist lawyers for what they thought were their modern concepts of women's rights...We have fought for human rights and civil liberties all our lives but wonder what sort of human rights are being claimed by these girls in jeans" (AJ 2).

The protection of rights of women by activists through these women shelters have also been criticized by some senators without even once giving serious thought to the matter of denying the basic human rights of nearly one half of the population. The women's rights lawyers, representing in this case the modern, the perspectival, and the individual's rights are thus accused of running prostitution dens if they fight for the rights of individual women and defy the community's traditions. By labelling Samia's move to the women's shelter as a 'kidnapping to a prostitution den' Senator Rehman underscores the community debt to Habib ur Rehman who, by killing Samia, salvaged its honor." (AJ 93). Women rights activists, who have been supporting the rights of women, are being held responsible for a decline in the morality of the society instead of their work being appreciated. The people who are against women rising and speaking for protecting their rights, as well as the rights of other women, are always at the receiving end of those who support the continuance of the age-old traditions that discriminate

against women. The common rhetoric of males is that a woman seeking rights for herself is trying to get fame for herself and that she is under some foreign influence which is hell-bent on destroying the social fabric of the country. The Women Human Rights Defenders face several challenges when they raise issues concerning women's rights. A Report of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights in Canada highlights that "The oppression of girls and women because they are girls and women is still far too common. Those who break gender and social norms and speak out against injustice face a wide range of violence, including intimidation, harassment, rape, sexual torture and of course even murder." (Source: Internet). Men who vehemently oppose equal rights for women resort to intimidation and character assassination of these human rights defenders to deter them. Their work is projected to be against social norms. These activists and even their families face constant threats from perpetrators of honor crimes, their supporters, the police, and even false cases are registered against them. They have to fight against all odds.

Jafri tells that even against all these odds, the feminist movement has now gained the necessary momentum and many women have joined this struggle and many more are likely to join shortly. With greater awareness and education, men have also started to understand the problems faced by women and are actively supporting them in their endeavors. In spite of the progress made by feminists, violence against women in general and honor killings in particular are still being carried out in many countries. However, it was not receiving the desired attention of the vast majority of people because of a lack of discussion on the issue. The result was that many women were facing mental and physical violence without a voice of support from any quarter. Jafri says that only after naming of this ritual practice as honor killing, it has got the desired attention from various women organizations in Pakistan and worldwide. Jafri tells that "It is important to note that only since the naming of the act of honor killing as such and its discussions in those terms in the media has the debate been triggered with significant vigor among the various discursive communities in Pakistan...By calling the age-old local ritual 'honor killing' in English the media has stirred up the discussion around the issue nationally and internationally. With this stirring of discussions, the act of honor killing have been brought up for the scrutiny by women's rights groups. More women have become aware about their rights as human beings" (AJ 6-7). The naming has resulted in the awakening of women's rights groups who have vehemently opposed these killings in the name of honor. More media coverage of such

incidences has brought the spotlight on these and human right activists and women activists have got more ammunition to target those nations which consider such practices as a part of their culture and traditions.

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