

2016

A Western Concept of Honour: Understanding Cultural Differences, Realizing Patriarchal Similarities

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Recommended Citation

Meharchand, Rebecca, "A Western Concept of Honour: Understanding Cultural Differences, Realizing Patriarchal Similarities" (2016). *2016 Undergraduate Awards*. 22.
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/ungradawards_2016/22

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Introduction:

The term 'honour' is surrounded by ample amounts of cultural anxiety. First appearing in mainstream news media in the early 2000's, 'honour' is a term that has come to be associated with the 'other', the 'third world', the 'backwards' and 'barbaric' societies. Perhaps the most important thing about the term 'honour' is that it automatically places any honour-related incident in the context of culture. In this paper, I will draw attention to the way in which the West hypocritically cries 'honour', pointing a finger at the 'Third World', while claiming to have absolved itself of any conceptual form of honour. I examine the ways in which patriarchy is still a problem in the West, but is not often perceived as such. By examining two prominent Canadian tragedies – the suicide of Amanda Todd and the Shafia family murders – I will argue that the West *does* have an honour code that disproportionately affects the lives of women. I have specifically chosen these cases for the following reasons: they both featured prominently in Canadian news media, they both became 'hot topics' of discussion around the same time (Shafia in early 2012 and Todd in the fall of the same year), and lastly because both cases involved young women who were seen to be incongruous with ideals of womanhood and femininity. In comparing the two cases, I will tease out a Western concept of honour. The last sections of this paper will consider what the implications of a Western concept of 'honour' would mean when trying to understand whether or not transnational feminism is possible, considering theoretical approaches such as cultural relativism and ethnocentrism.

Shafia Family Murders:

In January of 2012 Mohammad Shafia, Tooba Mohammed Yahya, and Hamed Shafia were found guilty and convicted of first degree murder. They were said to have murdered the three daughters Zanaib, Sahar, and Geeti, along with Rona Amir Mohammad, Shafia's first wife from a polygamous marriage. The alleged motive for the murder of the young girls was that Shafia “believed his daughters were too interested in boys, too immodest - too Western - to live. And he believed his first wife, Rona Amir, a bad influence on the girls” (Tripp 2012). The Shafia murders, then, were branded nationally and globally as a ‘crime of culture’ - the latest in a long string of ‘honour killings’. While the official charges laid against the remaining members of the Shafia family were murder charges, almost every single well-respected news source referred to this as a ‘crime of honour’ or ‘honour killing.’

In her article *Politics of Culture in Honour Killing*, Shahrzad Mojab speaks to the danger of labelling these crimes as ‘honour killings’, insisting that:

Calling the murder ‘honour killings’ accomplishes two goals. First, it makes it seem as if femicide is a highly unusual event. Second, it makes it seem as if femicide is confined to specific populations within Canada and specific national culture or religions in the world at large (Mojab 121).

In a typically ethnocentric fashion, the cultural anxiety surrounding the term ‘honour’ equates it with ‘backwards’ ‘uncivilized’ and ‘barbaric’ cultures – cultures that have conceptions of what it means to be ‘free’ that does not match the Western concept of ‘freedom’. Additionally, the fact that the term ‘honour’ has been linked to a particular religious group leads to varying levels of public anxiety, especially in the post-9/11 era. Mojab contends that it would be more prudent to consider ‘honour killings’ as another form of violence against women in women’s universal

struggle against patriarchy (Mojab 134). Killing in the name of ‘honour’, then, becomes an aspect of patriarchy, a part of a larger globalized schema of violence against women to ensure and reproduce male rule.

It is imperative to consider Mojab’s arguments when considering the media discourse surrounding the Shafia family murders. The term ‘honour killing’ placed the crime within a specific cultural and religious background, leading the general public and the jury to believe that Islamic culture itself was somehow responsible for the deaths of the four victims. In October of 2015, the remaining Shafia family members advocated for the commencement of a new trial, as the original trial judge had been hopelessly biased in reading the crime in the context of culture and nothing else, stating that the murders were a direct result of Shafia’s “twisted concept of honour” (Mehta 2015). The Shafia family murders were presented both in court and in dominant news media as a crime of culture, as a punishment for the victims’ desire to dress and act in a Western fashion. Coupled with general post-9/11 Islamophobia, as a result, the crime itself is seen as a consequence of a ‘backwards’ Islamic culture.

Amanda Todd’s Suicide:

The same year that the initial Shafia trial was taking place, another prominent tragedy came to light in Canadian news media. On October 10th 2012, fifteen-year-old Amanda Todd died by suicide – resulting from intense cyberbullying that stemmed from online sexual exploitation. Two years earlier, a friend she had met online convinced her to show him her breasts and later blackmailed her into revealing more, threatening to circulate the topless picture online and send it to her friends and family members (The Amanda Todd Story 2013). In 2011, her online ‘friend’ – later identified as Aydin Coban – resurfaced with a Facebook account that

used her topless photograph as a profile picture. Coban proceeded to add many of Todd's peers on social media and, consequently, Todd became the victim of intense slut-shaming and cyberbullying (Marotte 2016).

Todd's suicide was framed in Canadian news media as a tragic result of cyberbullying - a gross manifestation of the old phrase 'kids can be cruel'. However, when considering how the aftermath of her death was framed as a tragedy of cyberbullying and a vicious online stalker, it is important to note that almost every single proposed solution to the Amanda Todd case was to increase awareness on cyberbullying, addressing Todd's bullies as "tormentors, torturers, and maybe even murderers" stating that "we shouldn't trivialize what they did to Amanda by calling them bullies even if they all are adolescents themselves" (Bramham 2012). Very few - if any - predominant sources of Canadian media chose to tackle the case from a feminist lens, considering the slut-shaming aspects of Amanda Todd's circumstances. While the cyberbullying itself is undoubtedly an issue that deserves national attention, I argue that the slut-shaming aspect of Todd's case cannot be ignored and cannot go unexamined. In her book *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut*, Emily White considers the different developmental paths that girls labelled as "sexually deviant" or as "sluts" embark on. She states:

Traditional developmental narratives describe coming of age as a gradual solidifying and strengthening of the subject – the dawning realization of the self. But the girl chosen as the high school slut experiences coming of age not as the dawning of self-possession and subjectivity but as a darkening loss of self and complete objectification (White 117).

The fact that Amanda Todd was considered a sexual deviant because of her youthful blunders is imperative to understanding why it was that she died by suicide. Her 'deviancy' is also crucial to

consider when thinking about slut-shaming as a specific mode of bullying, and more than that, as a mode of social control – patriarchy’s dominance and power over women’s bodies.

Teasing Out a Western Concept of Honour:

At first glance, the Shafia family murders and Amanda Todd’s suicide have almost nothing in common. Shafia’s crimes were allegedly motivated by culture and ‘honour’, Todd took her own life due to cyberbullying and slut-shaming. However, if one digs a little deeper, there is one crucial similarity between the Shafia family and Todd: the policing of women’s bodies and the value placed on a woman’s ability to appear virginal and pure. In this section, I will examine the ways in which slut-shaming can be understood as a way of enforcing Western notions of ‘honour’. Through comparing the cases of Amanda Todd and the Shafia family, I will consider the similarities that exist at the fundamental levels of each case: the site of young girls’ bodies.

‘Third World’ conceptions of honour are often presented as a man’s effort to try and control a woman’s sexuality. Honour is considered a kind of ‘social safeguard’, an entity which mandates that girls be obedient, respectful, chaste, and pure (Pope 17). In his work *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Frederick Engels considers the evolution of the family and women’s subordination within the traditional patriarchal, capitalist conception of the family. He states “In order to make certain of the wife’s fidelity and therefore of the paternity of the children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of her husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights” (Engels 122). Through Engels’ arguments, an echo of the current perceptions and understandings of ‘honour’ begin to appear. The irony, of course, is that Engels’ work is addressing the West’s bourgeois class and how women have come to occupy a

subservient role within the Western monogamous family. The term ‘honour’ is almost always used exclusively when discussing violence against women in a ‘Third World’ country. It is viewed as a means for a man to exercise power over a woman by labelling ‘sexually deviant’ behaviour as shameful and deserving of punishment.

‘Honour’ is seen as something that ‘Third World’ countries and communities are bound by. The West preaches freedom and liberty for all (especially sexual freedom), but fails to consider its own ways of policing women’s bodies. In fact, as Inderpal Grewal argues, the West often fails to consider that patriarchy is still a widespread problem in its own nations; rather, the West has chosen to frame patriarchy as something belonging to the ‘other’, something that takes place in ‘backwards’ ‘barbaric’ nations with honour killings and honour based violence. Grewal states:

[T]he concept of patriarchy has been outsourced from the USA and Europe to do its messy work elsewhere. Such outsourcing requires that many in the USA believe that patriarchy no longer exists, or that if it does, is limited to zones that are believed to be anachronistic to the rest of the country (Grewal 2).

As a result, ‘honour’ and ‘honour killings’ are things that are not thought to exist in the West unless they are committed by a cultural minority – an immigrant family in the case of Shafia. Once this association is established, ‘honour’ is conceptualized through “the print news media to be the work of Muslim culture’ which nurtures an intractable patriarchy” (7).

By pointing a finger towards ‘Third World’ versions of honour, patriarchy, and violence against women, it is easy to ignore or forget that women’s subordination and violence against women is something that still occurs in the West itself. In ignoring values and social constructions that are contrary to the West’s own liberal vision, the West is able to draw a

distinction between ‘honour society’ and ‘modern society’, making the claim that the two are somehow inherently contradictory – that both cannot exist in one society at one given time (5). Therefore “the many murders committed in the USA, where entire families are killed by their fathers, brothers or relatives are not so called ‘honour killings’, nor are the murder-suicides... where the man may kill his wife and family and himself” (5). While the language may be different, the crime is more or less the same. A Western man may not consider using ‘honour’ as a defence upon murdering a female relative, yet that does not change the fact that male perpetrators of femicide often cite the violence as being motivated by “hurt pride or a desire to control a woman who spurned them” (Pope 21). Adding to Grewal’s work, I argue that Todd’s suicide can be considered a death that resulted from a Western conception of ‘honour’.

While it may not be labelled as such, I argue that there is an honour code that exists in the West. It may have become more insidious and elusive once the sexual revolution took place in the 1960’s and 1970’s, but it remains very much alive and well. Though the West preaches sexual liberty and freedom for men and women, women’s bodies are still policed and regulated in ways that men’s bodies are not. A prominent example of this would be the virgin/whore dichotomy that still prevails throughout Western society and Western media, despite claims of sexual liberation and equality for all. Essentially, this social construction places all women into one of two categories (virgin or whore), placing one on a specious pedestal, while demonizing the other. Todd was bullied horrendously because she had fallen on the worse side of this dichotomy by sending a topless photograph of herself to an online ‘friend’. Consequently, she was labelled as ‘sexually deviant’ – as a slut – and was teased, threatened, and coerced into suicide by her peers.

Todd's death can be understood in the context of 'honour' through analyzing the way in which her peers held her to the expectation that women give the semblance of being 'pure' and 'respectable' through being or acting virginal. Her worth as a female – even a young female – was deemed lesser because she had transgressed social boundaries and sent topless photographs of herself to an online 'friend'. While the West does not label this social boundary as 'honour', it is easy to see the parallels drawn between the slut-shaming aspect of Todd's case and the 'honour' factor in the Shafia family murders. Furthermore, just as we can consider Todd's case to be a result of the Western conception of 'honour', we can also consider the Shafia murders without honour as a factor. Western news media presented Mohammad Shafia's motives as the result of cultural factors – thinking his girls had become too Westernized, too interested in their appearance. If we eliminate all cultural terms and just examine the crime for what it is, then it is not so far fetched to see the Shafia murders outside of the 'honour' factor; to see it instead as an act of violence against women.

Significance - Implications for Transnational Feminism:

Ultimately, the main concern with taking factors such as honour out of a cultural context is that it becomes another way of universalizing women's experiences. In her work *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, Chandra Mohanty speaks to the danger of trying to understand all women's experiences as the same, stating:

Male violence (if that indeed is the appropriate label) must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies, both in order to understand it better, as well as in order to effectively organize to change it. Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political praxis (Mohanty 67).

For Mohanty, then, cultural and historical factors are imperative to understanding the motives behind violence against women, and because of this, it is dangerous to assume that all violence against women comes from the same place (male power and control over female bodies). However, if we consider Grewal's article *Outsourcing Patriarchy*, one aspect that Mohanty does not consider in her desire to read violence against women in its specific cultural and historical location is the way in which patriarchy and male violence are often constructed as problems of the 'other', exclusively.

In teasing out a Western concept of 'honour', my aim was to draw attention to the ways in which the 'Third World' concept of honour is seen as something 'barbaric' and 'backwards', despite the fact that the West holds very similar social constructions when it comes to male control (or social control) over women's bodies. The West is happy to consider itself the 'civilized' party, unplagued by traditional notions of honour, fully encouraging the sexual freedom and liberation of all men and women, and is unwilling to be critical of the ways in which patriarchy still exists and manifests itself within Western societies (Grewal 5). For Todd, the cyberbullying and the slut-shaming was used as a tool to isolate her, to mark her as 'deviant' and remove her from the realm of respectability, according to Western conceptions of 'honour'. While Todd's case of 'honour' was focused on the individual, the Shafia murders were focused on the community. Zanaib, Sahar, and Geeti were seen to have brought 'dishonour' on the family by exhibiting 'immodest' behaviours. In both cases, lives were ended because girls were considered to have exhibited shameful behaviour. The difference is that Todd's suicide was a result of her own 'shame', Shafia's murders were a result of his 'shame', or the perceived 'shame' on his family.

If we are to have a transnational or global feminism, it will only be possible if we understand the ways in which patriarchy manifests itself under different guises, yet in similar ways, in both 'First World' and 'Third World' societies. If we refuse to see the connections and the similarities between the two, insisting that patriarchy is fundamentally different in the West than it is in the 'Third World', we run the risk of viewing patriarchy as an exclusive problem within 'other' communities. By viewing Todd's death as a result of 'honour' and 'shame', the West is no longer able to consider itself the guardian and protector of all liberal values – the West will be forced to consider the ways in which it condemns the 'Third World' of having issues that still exist and still exhibit some influence within Western societies as well. There can be no transnational feminism if we refuse to see the ways in which patriarchy manifests itself in different cultures – there may not be a universal women's 'experience', but there is a universal system that seeks to subordinate women, and its name is patriarchy.

Conclusion:

Universalizing women's experiences has been a concern for feminist scholars for quite some time now. It would be a mistake to think that all women – in all parts of the world – share similar lived experiences. Rather, it would be more prudent to see the ways in which patriarchy impacts the lives of different women in different locations around the globe. Cultural relativism, or refusing to place a judgement on behaviours outside one's own culture sounds theoretically attractive, but practically, only enforces divides and differences between Western and 'Third World' communities. However, its opposite – ethnocentrism – is not an acceptable means of understanding and practicing a transnational feminism; where cultural relativism refrains from laying a judgement, ethnocentrism would judge everything 'other', measuring 'Third World'

communities to a Western standard. Through understanding patriarchy as a global phenomenon, manifesting itself in different ways in different places, we can begin to have a nuanced understanding of transnational feminism that focuses on the *different* ways patriarchy manifests itself to achieve *similar* ends in the lives of women. Theorizing a Western concept of honour is just one way to understand how this occurs and how it impacts the lives of women on a global scale in different ways.

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