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THE DISHONORABLE HONOR CRIMES IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Many authors have tackled the issue of honor crimes as a serious concern towards developing the appropriate remedies. Honor crimes have become widespread in the world, and they have been researched by several authors, feminism activists, and scholars because of the nature of the debate that has been triggered. Studies have shown that honor killings have been widespread where family members who are mainly males execute these killings because they consider that women have brought shame to the family. Honor crimes have been observed in different parts of the world, but more prevalent in Europe, Asia, North America and some parts of Africa. Feminist authors have been in the forefront in undertaking campaigns that are designed to stop honor killings that unfairly target women and girls. The paper will tackle the depiction of honour crimes in some renowned feminist novels. These novels include: *Love Like Blood* by Mark Billingham, *Burned Alive* by Souad, *Forbidden Love* by Norma Khouri, and *Unto the Daughters* by Karen Tintori.

Keywords: Honor, Crime, Patriarchy, Culture, Unjustifiable

Introduction

Honor crimes refer to a broad range of crimes, which are practiced in diverse cultures and societies across the world (Bettiga-Boukerbout230). In the media reports, honor killings are frequently regarded as the most barbaric plus atrocious acts that violate the basic rights of women (Meetoand Mizra57). Because of their prevalence and harshness in different societies, many authors depict honour crimes in novels to increase awareness of the inhumanity of such crimes. Nowadays, deliberations regarding honor killings are more and more noticeable in the mainstream media. Nonetheless, one should consider that several honor crimes go unobserved and are never recorded. In some countries, honor crimes are still considered tolerable as well as justifiable, and the executors are barred from any form of punishment. For example, in Jordan, the law has flaws where the executors are basically excused (Amir17). Honor crimes are committed because a woman or a girl is alleged to have brought shame on the family through declining to join a prearranged marriage, becoming a casualty of a sexual violence, or contemplating divorce or alleged to have committed infidelity (Cohan178).

The conception of honor crimes comprises all kinds of aggression on women in the name of honor. Honor crimes are justified by the fact that a casualty has availed the crime on herself through defaming the honour of her family. Thus, it is an act "which focuses at taking away the tarnish of honor via the utilization of social or expressive compulsion on an individual whose acts have resulted in dishonor (Wasti362). Honor killing

is described as the murder of females for alleged divergence from sexual customs that are enforced by the community (Gill23). The executors are not only the male spouses of the victim, other male members of the family or community may also execute the act of killing. Human Rights Watch describes honor murder as an action of vengeance that is executed by normally male associates and relatives against normally women (Human Rights Watch1).

There are around 5,000 honor killings that constitute honor-based crimes in the world on annual basis, where experts estimate that the actual number of honor crimes would be much elevated. These honor crimes have been recorded largely in Europe, Asia plus North America. Nevertheless, honor crimes are most widespread in regions throughout South Asia and the Middle East. In addition, India and Pakistan record 1,000 honor murders yearly (Human Rights Watch1). "The number of honor crimes may be about 20,000 since several cases of honor killings go unreported and law is rarely enforced" (Payton 13).

At the moment, there is no specific law that deals with honor crimes in many states around the world (Wasti361). The murders come under the general categories of manslaughter or homicide. In some states, honor killings are still considered tolerable as well as justifiable, and perpetrators are excluded from any kind of punishment. For instance, in Jordan, Article 430 safeguards males who murder their spouses for committing adultery while in Iraq, the legal system is founded on *Sharia* law by which a male companion is allowed to kill the wife with no penalty with suspicion of committing adultery (Payton15). Honor crimes are acknowledged as a type of aggression against women in international human rights laws. Honor crimes violate the provisions of the International Convention of Human Rights (1948) (Human Rights Watch1). The international law obliges nations to safeguard women from gender-based hostility and to exclude "honor" as a lawful defense for actions of aggression against women (Mitchel39).

### Main Text

Because violence in the pretext of honor has become a worldwide challenge, many authors tackle it in a literary form in hope of finding remedies. No one can deny that the first step to solve a problem is to determine the problem itself. Literature has undertaken a more comprehensive role of echoing troubles in order for humans to contemplate them and do their best to elucidate them. Accordingly, many authors depict honor crimes in their novels in order to stimulate people to overcome the savagery of such crimes. In fact, these novels bequeath an understanding and empathy in the reader. Some of these novels are: *Love Like Blood* by Mark Billingham, *Burned Alive* by Souad, *Unto the Daughters* by Karen Tintori, *Forbidden Love* by Norma Khouri.

In *Love Like Blood*, Mark Billingham highlights the brutality of honor crimes. The author explores honor killings as a reflection of ferocious misogyny. The author says that "It was the most disturbing case I had ever come across" referring to the honor killings ( ctd in Martin1).

*Love Like Blood* revolves around Suzan, who is a teacher living in Birmingham, London. Suzan is compelled into a prearranged marriage with a man who continues to maltreat her sexually and emotionally. That man treats Suzan as an object of sexual interest. So, Suzan leaves the man, and she falls in love with another man. The couple " knew the trouble they were going to get in but they couldn't be without one another so they would meet secretly" (ctd in Martin 1). However, her father and uncle believe that she has transgressed the honor code, so they decide to kill her for violating the honor code and bringing disgrace on the men folk (Martin1). Suzan is induced by her uncle where she is tormented, raped, and stifled and her body is dumped in a suitcase: "They had anally raped Banaz, she was vomiting, she was so afraid. They had wrapped a cord three times around her neck so tightly that it was biting into her flesh. He described having his feet on her back and pulling and pulling on that cord" (ctd in Martin1).

Suzan who is the protagonist suffers immensely in the hands of cruel men for breaking the honor code. The honor crime in the novel is attributed to a cultural reason. Charles Flynn declares honor as "A culturally instilled conception of self as scared social object" (49). Diverging from cultural or traditional customs and patterns — including choice of attire, learning, and employment — can instigate honor

crimes. Rejection of an arranged marriage is also often a trigger of honor killing in many cultures. The family which has prearranged the marriage hazards shame if the marriage does not proceed. Honor crimes are incited by cultural norms that regard girls and women to be the possession of men. It is maintained by the idea that a woman's body is a container of her family's honor rather than her own to do with as she likes. Feminists have endeavored to fight honor crime due to cultural norms by claiming that "it undermines the freedom and dignity of women in the society" (Cohan178).

I believe that *Love Like Blood* raises many questions in regard to honor crimes. The question that imposes itself is that is it honorable to kill a defenseless woman in such a brutal way. Is it also a crime to love against the wishes of men folk who force her into a loveless marriage! Is pure love not honorable while brutal killing is honorable! Should not the husband be punished or blamed! In the novel, the husband that abuses his wife sexually and emotionally is not punished or blamed because the patriarchal society cushions him from such punishment. Contemplating the abovementioned questions, I believe it is not an honor killing but a patriarchal killing:

The ideology of honour is one which directly results from patriarchal gender roles, wherein conformity to these roles is demanded and a source of status and acceptance within the community; and where deviance is censured. For males, honour is gained through exerting dominance and control over females and younger males, and lost through weakness and failure to control; it can be restored through violent and coercive acts. For females, honour is preserved through subordinancy, obedience, chastity, endurance and virginity, and it may be lost through any autonomous acts, particularly those relating to sexuality, and cannot be restored. Ultimately it is those with power within the family and the community (men and older women who have proved their internalization of the „honour“ code through the policing of younger women) who decide what acts are honourable or dishonourable. (Pal49)

*Burned Alive* by Souad is a real life story about Souad, who is burned alive because she is believed to have brought disgrace to her male relatives. The book narrates a journey of an honor crime survivor who escapes to Europe and publishes her story. The traumatic tale is one, which narrates how Souad survives an honor crime undertaken by her brother-in law, who burns her for having a sexual relationship with her neighbor as well as her consequent pregnancy (Souadand Cuny4). Her brother in-law is given the task to carry out the honor killing, so "he poured gasoline over her and set her on fire" in an effort to kill Souad" (Souadand Cuny6). During this time, Souad is only seventeen years old residing in one of the West Bank villages. Harshly burned, Souad is abandoned and left to die until Jacqueline Thibault, the European aid employee arranges for their transference to Switzerland (Taylor1). And like other societies with this practice, the victims should be punished for violating the values established by the society. In fact, Soaud is not given any nursing care because the hospital she is admitted into wants her to die as needed by the society (Taylor1).

The reason for committing the honor crime in this novel is purely cultural. In this community, sex before marriage is taken to be a grave dishonor to one's family, and it is punishable by death. The question that forces itself here is what drives Souad to commit adultery? I believe that what drives Souad to commit adultery is what she suffers from beating and enslavement by her family. Using clearly simple language, she portrays a childhood of factual enslavement in which she was uneducated, oblivious of anything beyond the boundaries of the village, working "harder than a beast of burden and battered daily" (SouadandCuny4). Cruelty and hitting are also a common practice in her village. Souad says:

"My father would shout, 'Why have the sheep come back by themselves?' then pull me by the hair and drag me into the kitchen to hit me. Once he tied up my sister Kainat and me, our hands behind our backs, our legs bound, and a scarf over our mouths to stop us screaming. We stayed like that all night, tied to a gate in the stable" (Souadand Cuny11). As Souad is gradually cured and establishes a new life for herself in Europe, awful images emerge out of her muddled memory: "Her mother suffocating undesirable female babies at birth; her brother suffocating her younger sister with a telephone wire for committing an unknown mistake" (Souad and Cuny 13).

*Burned Alive* wonders how beating women is an honorable act! Religions like Islam does not allow women to be beaten, and that is stated in Koran 4:34 (Gleeson, 2018, p. 1). What is astonishing is that the man who has the sexual affair with Soaud is not punished, burned, or killed for the sole reason that he is a man. Soaud escapes to the bosom of another man because her family has no respect, love and care for her. Accordingly, she decides to seek love elsewhere. In this regard, her family should have been the one punished not Soaud.

In *Forbidden Love* by Norma Khouri addresses the plight of honor crimes among the women in Jordan. Honor crime is the act of cleaning the family's honor "due to an illicit love affair..." (ctd in Fickling1). This is a feminist novel that narrates the plight of an Arabian woman trodden under the heels of her men folk. Specifically, the author depicts the impacts of honor crimes on characters, such as Dalia. Dalia as the main character and a woman in the Arab society is expected to obey male family members and relatives. Dalia violates the honor code by having a relationship with a Christian man, Michael (Fickling1). The relationship could not be hidden, and soon Dalia's brother tells her father. So, the father kills Dalia to clean his name from the dishonorable behavior (Fickling1). Thus, at the age of 26, Dalia becomes a victim of honor crime for falling in the forbidden love.

The honor crime in *Forbidden Love* is attributed to a religious reason since it involves a Muslim and a Christian marrying each other. However, Islam does not really prohibit the marriage between a Muslim woman and a Christian man if the Christian man confesses his Islam. According to Ursula Smartt, "Traditional misinterpretations of religion have played a role in developing a patriarchal culture that places an emphasis on female chastity and male superiority (170). Islam does not easily allow the killing of a sinful woman easily, but it puts conditions for that such as four witnesses and other conditions. In addition, the man is allowed to get married to a non-Muslim woman, mainly a Christian or a Jew who are considered by the Islamic schools as "People of the Book". According to Yasmeen Hassan,

Honour killings have also taken on a religious justification. Although the concept of honour killings predates Islam and is not sanctioned by Islam, these killings are commonly linked to religion because of their connection with enforcement of morality and upholding the patriarchal structure. (603)

Karen Tintori's *Unto the Daughters* is a story of a woman grappling with a violent, patriarchal family in Sicily. Like other feminist authors, the novel narrates a story of Aunt Frances' honor killing. Frances whilst 16 years old falls in love with a youthful barber. Frances' father wants her to marry an old man working in Mafia. Frances' father believes that this marriage could give the family a boost in the mob. However, Frances escapes with the barber, and when she comes back home a married lady, she is killed by throwing her into the waters of Belle Isle.

Is the honor crime in this novel justifiable? The honor crime depicted in *Unto the Daughters* is not justifiable by any means. According to the society that Frances lives in, marrying a man for the sake of status and money is acceptable as well as honorable. However, it is not a marriage, but it is a business deal. The worse is that the business deal is settled between Frances' father and a man belonging to Mafia. So, is it honorable to sell one's daughter to a man belonging to Mafia for the sake of money and status! Furthermore, throwing a woman into water is not an honorable act at all. What is shocking is that Frances is killed even after getting married. In this novel, the honor crime is not attributed to a cultural or a religious reason, but it is attributed to a financial reason. Where is the honor in killing one's daughter or sister for not quenching their greed?

## Conclusion

No one can deny that honor crimes have been at center of discussion among many authors around the world because of their growing importance. Honor crimes have been under criticism from the media and feminism activists around the world because women and girls are unfairly the most affected. It seems from the novels discussed in this paper that honor crimes are committed in different countries and cultures. So, it is a global problem as it is not limited to one country or one culture. Accordingly, there is the need to develop regulations among the different states around the world to eliminate such a problem. States should ensure

that criminal codes as well as provisions that relate to honor killing do not condone honor crimes and do not include discriminatory provisions concerning justifications. In addition, intentional encouragement and participation in an honor crime must be criminalized (Wasti389). Furthermore, providing information to young women through education will play a primary role in eliminating honor crimes in the society. Those perceived to have a greater risk of violence at home should be provided with information on their rights and the assistance along with remedies accessible to them (Critelliand Willett 218). These include human rights education, and specifically information on the working of the criminal justice system. Removing ignorance amongst individuals in the society through media will be an effective strategy to eliminate honor crimes.

Honor crime is an old-timey crime which still grasps its place in today's society despite the advanced mentality. Honor killing is the most exasperated kind of honor crime which is widespread almost in all the societies of the world with variety in its statistics. After discussing the honor crimes committed the aforementioned novels, the use of the word "honor" should be considered with considerable agnosticism as it is the culprit of a particular crime who gives the meaning of honor. This switches the gravity from the fact that a crime has been committed against the victim and may permit the executer of the crime to fabricate a justification and hide his real motives.

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