

**Re- Defining Honour in Islam: An Islamic Women Memoirists'
Outlook**

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Abstract

Memoir, a non-fictional art has been in vogue in the recent years. It is also called life narrative, where an instance in the life of an individual is documented in first person point of view. Memoir's association with Islamic women has been commendable. Women in Islam have for long been subjugated in the name of Islam, which is a sheer misinterpretation. Memoirs have been a vehicle for women to express their emotional state. In spite of the rise of Islamic feminism in support of Muslim women's rights, the problem persists. Among the vehemence which women face, violence in the name of honour is wide spread. The Memoirs *In the Name of Honour* and *I am Nujood, aged 10 and Divorced* are illustrations for the situation which millions of women are subjected to in the name of honour. The relentless fight which Mukhtar Mai and Nujood put forward in their life against violence makes the difference.

Keywords: Memoir, Islam, Islamic feminism, Honour, Subjugation

INTRODUCTION

Memoir, from French ‘Memoire’ meaning memory or reminiscence is a nonfiction genre which is considered as a form of literary art. It chronicles the instants or events in the life of real individuals in first person narrative. “In writing one’s life one may bring a new self into being” (Pg. 14) states Thomas Couser in his book *Memoir – An Introduction*. He believes that writing a memoir leads to self –invention. Ever since its emergence, Memoir has created a huge impact in the field of life writing. Since its popularity Memoir is said to have eclipsed autobiography

Memoir has gained momentum amongst women in Islamic countries. Memoirs by Islamic women throws light on the predicaments they face in the name of religion. Women’s voices have long been subjugated in the name of honour, their predicaments have been left undocumented. Through the emergence of memoirs Islamic women have acquired a way of expressing their traumatic memories. One such compelling memoir is *In the Name of Honour*, a memoir which captures crimes done in the name of honour in Pakistan.

“the real question my country must ask itself is, if the honour of men lies in women, why do men want to rape or kill that honour?” (*In The Name of Honour*, 161) is the question advanced by Mukhtaran Bibi, a victim of honour vengeance in her memoir *In The Name of Honour*. Mukhtaran Bibi also known as Mukhtar Mai is a Pakistani woman from the village of Meerwala in the rural Muzaffargarh district of Pakistan. Mukhtar Mai was a survivor of a gang rape as a form of honour revenge, on the orders of a tribal council, of the local Mastoi clan that was more powerful as opposed to her Gujar clan. Although the law anticipated her to commit suicide after being raped, Mukhtaran Mai braved all obstacles and pursued her fight towards regaining her lost honour.

Pakistan is a sovereign country in South Asia, formed as an independent nation for Muslims. Lately, Pakistan has grabbed headlines for its notorious treatment of women .In the name of honour and justice there are multifarious cultural customs prevalent in Pakistan. Some of them are Karo Kari, Murder in the name of honour, Nikah with Quran, Customs of child marriages like Vani and Sawara where young girls are forcibly married to the members of different clans to resolve conflicts and feuds generated through murders. In 2014, the World Economic Forum ranked Pakistan as the Second worst country in the world in terms of gender equality. (Times of India, 2014)

Mukhtaran Mai's twelve year old brother Shakur from the Gujar clan was accused of zina bil jabar (fornication) with an upper class twenty year old Mastoi woman Salma. This offended the honour of the upper class Mastoi clan. Mukhtaran Mai's family proposed to settle the matter with the Mastois by marrying Shakur to Salma and marrying Mukhtaran Bibi to one of the Mastoi men, but the Jirga refused insisting that illicit conduct must be settled with illicit conduct according to the principle of an eye for eye. The arrogance of the Mastoi clan is expressed by her when she says "They don't even need weapons. Rape kills her. Rape is the ultimate weapon: it shames the other clan forever". (*In The Name of Honour*, 11)

So the Jirga or Panchayat who are a council of elders from the upper class community decided to order for an gang rape to avenge the Gujar clan. Mukhtaran Mai says "This is the first time the councilors themselves have fixed upon a gang rape as a means to what they call their honour justice". (*In The Name of Honour*, 10) Mukhtaran Bibi knew very little of what was happening. She reached the place and was shocked to hear the declaration of gang rape on her. She felt it impossible to escape nor did she have time to pray, four men raped her on the beaten earth of the empty stable.

The villagers were waiting outside the stable. When she was pushed outside the stable, she stumbled and fell calling out to her father, who tossed his shawl to help her preserve the only dignity she was left with. She felt a woman's honour is least given importance when compared to the honour of a man "For them a woman is simply an object of possession, honour or revenge. They marry or rape them according to their conception of tribal pride". (*In The Name of Honour*,11)

Every time she narrated the events before the police and the judge, she felt she was reliving the whole experience. In spite of her struggle, the investigation was botched up and her rape was not proven, as according to the Hudud laws, she had to produce four male witnesses to prove her rape. In spite of her obstacles Mukhtaran Mai continued her fight to reclaim her honour as she believed that she was fighting with the strength of her religious faith, with respect to the Quran and the Sunnah, She strongly believes, "The form of tribal justice that consists of raping and terrorizing people to maintain control of a village has nothing to do with the Koran". (*In The Name of Honour*,140)

Mukhtaran Mai states that it is the people who support such practices bring dishonor to the country. She feels “That is the true honour of my homeland: to allow a woman, educated or illiterate, to speak out in protest against an injustice done to her”. (*In The Name of Honour*, 161)

Mukhtaran Mai’s case gained recognition through the domestic and International media, which facilitated her at least to take the culprits to court. But there are thousands of voices which go unheard, as very few women get enough support and courage to speak up for themselves. Recently, the advent of memoir has aided women in Islamic countries. In spite of glaring harrowing incidents, the plight of Islamic women have for long been neglected by mainstream western feminism. To alleviate their fanatic subjugation women in Islam have initiated a movement called Islamic feminism, molded within the paradigms of Islam. Though Islamic feminism has evolved into a global movement it remains dormant because of its lack of support from the government and society.

Another poignant memoir *I am Nujood*, unfolds the traumatic life of a ten year old Yemeni girl Nujood, whose life is an illustration of the tormenting lives of child brides across the world. Nujood was like every other child, full of dreams, love for chocolates, playing hide and seek, etc. Apart from the innate traditions, extreme poverty made her father to get rid of her, as her father states “I’ve made my decision! Besides, you know we haven’t enough money to feed the whole family. So this will mean one less mouth”. (*I am Nujood*, 54 – 55)

Nujood was married off at the age of nine to a man who was three times her age. Her marital life was a disaster. During the day she had to obey her mother – in – law’s orders. Cut up the vegetables, feed the chickens, wash the floor and do the dishes and scrub the greased blackened pots. Even if she stopped for a moment, her mother in law pulled her hair with filthy hands. She wound up as sticky as the kitchen. At night fall panic seized her heart at the arrival of her husband. She was not able to bear the savagery, pain and distress. He even hit her with the stick. His mother egged him telling “Hit her even harder. She must listen to you, she’s your wife.”(*I am Nujood*, 93)

Being a prey to sexual abuse, when Nujood wanted to seek the help of her parents, she was subjugated by telling that it would bring dishonor to their family. So she had to silently endure her traumatic life. When she told her father that she is not able to bear the torment and so she wanted to divorce her husband, she was told that, “If you divorce your husband, my brothers

and cousins will kill me! Sharaf, Honor comes first. Honor! Do you understand”. (*I am Nujood*, 96)

Nujood reacts telling that she did not understand the meaning of honour. She could not understand why her family was defending the man who tormented her. In spite of all these impediments Nujood never relented, with the help of Shada, a lawyer managed to get a divorce. In the court room, amidst the clamor, one of her uncles stood up from his bench and called out to Shada telling her that “You’ve sullied the reputation of our family! You have stained our honour!”. (*I am Nujood*, 119) The honour of the family was more given more consideration than pain endured by women.

Nujood’s elder sister Mona was a victim of rape. When the case was handed over to the village elders, they came up with a solution, Mona states, “Informed of the business, the village sheikh married us hastily, before rumors could spread from house to house and valley to valley. In the name of honour! He said it was best to stamp out such rumors right away”. (*I am Nujood*, 137) Mona painfully conveyed, “No one ever asked me what I thought. They struck a blue dress on me and by the next day I was his wife”. (*I am Nujood*, 13)

In Islamic countries violence on women is done in the name of religion, but the underlying truth is that Islam instructs men to treat women honorably and with kindness. *The Quran*, instructs true believers to treat women with compassion, as it says “consort with them in kindness, for if ye hate them it may happen that ye hate a thing wherein Allah hath placed much goodness.” (An – Nisa 004. 019) But as Riffat Hassan, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Louisville, puts it, ‘The way Islam has been practiced in most Muslim societies for centuries has left millions of Muslim women with battered bodies, minds and souls’. (Beyer, 2001)

The memoirs of Mukhtaran Mai and Nujood are illustrations of the lives, which thousands of women encounter every day. The general conception that women are considered the honour of a family and society has seeped into the minds of people. Belief in the ideology that blood cleanses honour and granting Capital punishment for the mere suspicion that a female relative has shamed or tarnished the family image is a feudal attitude which needs reconsideration. Attempts by the government and enlightened group to elevate the status of

women have been unproductive. Amidst this global technological boom, the struggle and the painful cries of the subjugated women go unheeded.

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