Conjugal Cacophony in *Daughters of Shame* by Jaswinder Sanghera

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Abstract

Unabated in every country and continent is the issue of the status of woman once she enters the institution of marriage. It is a kind of collective victimhood which all women suffer where the patriarchal elements of the society name them as 'home breakers' as depicted in *Daughters of Shame*. Women have no shelter to seek, their freedom, money and lives are controlled by men in the patriarchal set up leading to their oppression, suppression, repression, victimization and marginalization. Discordant notes are struck in a relationship when young girls are forced to marry someone who is a stranger to them. This paper aims at studying how such an arrangement where marriage takes place against the wishes of the girls is taking a devastating toll not only on them but also on their family and society depriving them of their freedom. This paper is an attempt to search a world for these women where

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they are treated at par with men as they have always yearned to create a kingdom where they

shall be heard some day.

Introduction

Undeniably, family is a vital principal group in a society. Family and marriage are the two

pillars of any societal institution. Marriage is hallowed as sacred and is for most Asians, more

particularly Hindus, not merely a sacrament but is sacrosanct. Conjugal cacophony' means

marital discord. The discord is not just because of the ego-clashes, dowry, mismatch or of

incongruity between man and woman in a relationship but due to the forced marriages of

minors who are aware of their rights but unable to protest against their very own parents and

community. Those who rebel or raise their voice against the set norms have always been

under the threat of the people of the community so much so that sometimes they are even

killed for honour.

The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women, not only in

Asian countries but also in the Asian families settled abroad. On daily basis, we read in

newspapers about honour killings, forced marriages, dowry cases which show the inhuman

side of man in a patriarchal system which creates the mindset of a man being an owner and a

woman being a commodity. When these Asians go abroad and assimilate with their

unfamiliar way of life, it is expected from them that they should be open-minded and should

shed the burden of age-old canons of patriarchy. But being a part of Asian community, as a

reader when we go through the work of Jaswinder Sanghera, it comes as a shock that even in

the European countries the immigrant Asians are still carrying the load of patriarchy and

passing it forward to their families, or, as one can say, they are forcing their future

generations to follow the same rituals even if their progeny are not able to adapt themselves

in that atmosphere because of the cultural clash.

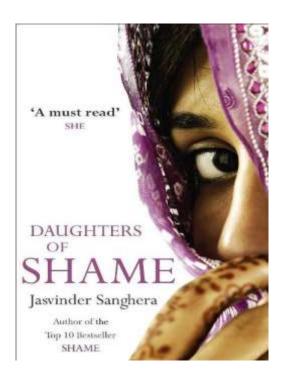
Man-Woman Relationship In and After Marriage

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Jaswinder Sanghera is specially noted for her discerning portrayal of the inner life of the female characters before and after marriage in her writings.

Daughters of Shame is a compilation of stories told to Jaswinder Sanghera by Asian women living in Britain who were sufferers of conjugal violence, forced marriages, and the atrocious, so-called honour-based crimes. D.H. Lawrence has rightly stated, 'The vast relationship for humanity will always be the relationship between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary.' Jaswinder Sanghera in her portrayal of man-woman relationship mostly ruminates over the dilemma of modern women particularly in male-chauvinistic society and their annihilation at the altar of marriage. Marriage assumes the role of a subtle expression of patriarchal control and the most powerful weapon for female subjugation where women are drugged, trampled, incarcerated, raped and terrorized within the walls of the homes they grew up in.

Subjection and Forced Marriage

Not only is the conception of women limited to the newly born female, it extends far beyond that. A daughter is considered a painful burden, a potential source of shame to her father.

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This encourages in her a feeling of subjection and powerlessness. Discordant notes are struck

in a marriage when following the social norms, the happiness of the parents overshadows the

happiness of the child. As a family's honor is tightly interwoven with the marriage and sexual

behavior of its daughters, forced marriage appears to be triggered by a woman exercising her

own right to choose a spouse, or objecting to one chosen by her family. Jaswinder Sanghera

is running an institute named Karma Nirwana through which she tries to rescue the victims of

forced marriages. She observes during this process that

Hijabs pulled close around their bruises, faces taut with misery, voices strained-is how

young they were. They came to us as battered wives but they were barely more than

children. Children who must have known of or suspected their fate before it

happened, but who had no idea of where to turn for help (9).

Although both women and men can be the victims of forced marriage, the honor of a family

is tied primarily to the status of the woman, leaving her much more vulnerable to persuasion

and coercion into a union to which she objects. But a forced marriage does not take place in

vacuum and is mostly a part of a cycle of abuse, domestic violence and bullying within

families. Not only the male members of the family keep an eye on their daughters like

bodyguards but none other than their mothers are torturing their daughters. When the writer

came in contact with a girl named Maya she was shocked with the viciousness of her

mother, the one who had borne her and taken pains to bring her to this world. But Maya said

she stood up to her, she stood there accepting blows until something really snapped and she

retaliated.

'That drove her really mad. She grabbed me by the hair and hurled me to the floor.

With all the noise everyone had come to see what was happening. She hit me so the

nails of plank were piercing me and then she dragged me by the hair along the floor

all the way to my bedroom. Everyone was watching. She hit me and hit me until her

anger was spent ... (219).

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This depicts the malice of parents on their offspring for the sake of preserving their culture and religion. Girls like Maya are helpless and they have to suffer just because they deny entering into forced marriage and want to marry someone they love. According to a research conducted by the Forced Marriage Unit, some men are also victims of forced marriages but 85% cases handled by them are of women. Institutions like Karma Nirvana also received calls from male victims of forced marriages like Imran, a Muslim by religion; he comes from a family where arranged marriages are a norm. It is said that after marriage 'he's grown into loving her.' When he was fifteen his sister told him once that his marriage has been fixed with a five year old girl and on his denial his sister told him "you've got no choice...you can't say no, it's a question of honour" (90). This led to Imran's rebellion by indulging in

drinking, smoking, fighting and to an extent that he was even expelled from school. At this

his mother sent him to Pakistan for rehabilitation by imprisoning him in a room like a caged

bird whose wings have been clipped and there he was tightened with shackles.

'They were made of iron. There was a chain with a padlock on it to go round each ankle and a solid bar between them to stop me walking properly. Attached to the bar was another chain which had a big iron ball at the end of it......I tried to walk but it was so heavy and the chains rubbed against my ankles. It was really painful, by the end of that first day my skin was red and raw' (93).

This is a real example of the extent of cruelty and spitefulness Asian parents abroad can undergo to convince their children like Imran that marrying a girl of his parent's choice will always prove to be good for him.

Honour Killing

One of the world's most hidden and heinous crime is honour killing. According to Human Rights Watch, "Honour killings are acts of vengeance, usually death, committed by male family members against female family members, who are held to have brought dishonor upon the family. A woman can be targeted by (individuals within) her family for a variety of reasons, including: refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual

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assault, seeking a divorce—even from an abusive husband—or (allegedly) committing adultery. The mere perception that a woman has behaved in a way that "dishonors" her family is sufficient to trigger an attack on her life."

Women are often murdered in all parts of the world for even slight rumor of dishonoring the family name and are considered as vessels of the family reputation. Women are often regarded as the commodity of men and "The concept of ownership has turned women into a commodity which can be exchanged, bought, and sold" (Mayell, p-15). In addition to being seen as a possession, women are thought of as persons who should not blacken the family name. This practice has thrived for centuries.

There are many reasons that people are killed, some *raison d'être* being: marital infidelity, pre-marital sex, flirting, or even failing to serve a meal on time. India and Pakistan have the most honor killings annually. Under the guise of religion, Sanghera discusses the rational dreadfulness that women are put through for the sake of what their families perceive as 'honour'. These girls went to English schools and mingled with western children. How can their families expect the control of the school and their peers to bounce off their children? It is perhaps the cultural conflict between Eastern and Western Values.

Culture, which is supposed to constitute the way of life of an entire society including the manners, dress, language and rituals of a nation, seems to have led towards the spirit of self denial and self sacrifice for all the women who have narrated their experiences in this work.

When an Asian family moves to the West they try to make an endeavour to keep their values and norms intact and to minimize the Western influence upon them. In an open society closed systems can't be made obligatory. To the world at large, what they do is wrong. But in their culture, they have not done anything wrong. So a feeling of alien authority weighs upon them and any non-conformity to it is not accepted. All that is accepted is to live with what Thomas Hobbes calls as "Brutish" nature of man.

Honour killing can better be called 'honour murder' and there is perhaps, nothing honourable about honour killing. "'Honour' for men is related to women's behaviour because they are **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940

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seen as the property of the family - and of the community. They have no independent

identities; they are not independent human beings and start thinking the way their social set

up makes them think "the children, my family, my husband...and izzat, should rarely

be there because that's very important to me too" says Fatima who murders her sister-in -

law who elopes in order to seek an escape from forced marriage (77).

Men also think of women as an extension of themselves. When women infringe these values,

it comes as a direct blow to the man's sense of identity. So of course, a woman fails as a

mother and a wife if she doesn't meet these standards. In "Honour: Crimes, Paradigms and

Violence Against Women," Lynn Welchman Baker states that honour systems are an integral

part of the process of killing women by their families or intimates, regardless of where the

woman lives (Lynn Welchman, p- 164).

This theory includes three comparative areas related to honour systems - the control of female

behavior, male feelings at loss of that control and community participation in 'enhancing and

controlling this shame'. But many a times these victims still wish to go back to their families,

in spite of the fact that their loved ones had turned into tormentors, torturers and even

murders.

Violence and Abuse

A problem of pandemic proportions violence can be termed as 'a loss of control of aggressive

impulse leading to action' (Shengold, p-12) and it manifests itself in various forms in women

leading to their subjugation, repression victimization and marginalization affecting them

physically, emotionally and psychologically. In The Feminist Challenge: Knowing and

Ending the Violence, Ann Duffy states, 'The lives of almost all women, regardless of class,

caste and age race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability or disability have been distorted

by violence and the expectation of violence. Whether women are the actual targets of

violence, they live in fear of violence or live with a commitment to transcend the violence,

violence permeates their life experience and sense of self' (Dufy, p-152).

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Forced marriage is recognized as a form of violence against women. In particular, domestic

violence is a gendered crime, most often perpetrated by men on women. It is about one

person getting and keeping power and control over another person in an intimate relationship.

It is a pattern of behavior in which one intimate partner uses physical violence, coercion,

threats, intimidation, isolation and emotional, sexual or economic abuse to control and

change the behavior of the other partner. Domestic violence occurs in the poorest ghettos, the

fanciest mansions and white-picket-fence neighborhoods.

According to a survey conducted by National Coalition against Domestic Violence, about

95% of victims of domestic violence are women. Over 50% of all women will experience

physical violence in an intimate relationship, and for 24-30% of those women, the battering

will be regular and on-going. Every 15 seconds the crime of battering occurs. Most abusers

are men. They may seem gentle, mean, quiet or loud, and may be big or small. There is some

evidence that shows that boys who grow up with domestic violence often become abusers as

adults, however, many abusers are from non-violent homes, and many boys from violent

homes do not grow up to be abusive.

However, in this non-fictional work, abuse is also perpetrated by some other family members

as in the character of Surjit. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, abuse refers to treat

people or beings with cruelty or violence, especially regularly or repeatedly. Abuse may refer

to cruelty in any form, say, emotional, physical, sexual or psychological. Undermining

Surjit's sense of self-worth she was emotionally abused by her parents' family:

"It was like being pinned to the wall: having eyes to see and a heart to feel but being

unable to use them...She remembers how she was made to feel useless and stupid,

having missed so much of her education through no fault of her own (202).

She was belittled, humiliated and degraded not only by her parents but also by the family she

was married to and in despair, she wanted to run "but there was nowhere to go, nowhere to

hide and no-one to turn to." More so, she was sexually as well as psychologically abused by

her husband and treated as a piece of meat by him.

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Sexual abuse is coercing or attempting to coerce any sexual contact without consent, e.g.,

marital rape, forcing sex after physical beating, attacks on sexual parts of the body or treating

another in a sexually demeaning manner. As one character Khalida, who is a victim of forced

marriage, got raped by her husband. She told her father and he said, "That's not rape, it's a

husband's right" (21). Another victim Surjit also suffered this after wedding when she had

been drugged on her wedding night and

"I woke up feeling humiliated and degraded, knowing I'd been raped by a stranger

and feeling I had lost my dignity, which was something I hadn't even known I had

until this time..."

The nights of rape were repeated over and over again for the next eight-and-a-half

years. "I was treated like a piece of meat and the British government gave him a

passport to do this" (207).

Psychological abuse, though not easy to define, is the systemic destruction of a person's self-

esteem and/or sense of safety, often occurring in relationships where there are differences in

power and control (Follingst and Dehart,p-895). It includes threats of harm or abandonment,

humiliation, deprivation of contact, isolation and other psychologically abusive tactics and

behaviours.

As most of the victims of forced marriages and honour killings first go through

mental, psychological and physical trauma. Honour-izzat is the cornerstone of the

Asian community and since the beginning of time it's been the job of girls and

women to keep it polished. And that's really hard because so many things can tarnish

it. Wearing lipstick, owing a mobile phone, cutting your hair; any of those things

could be said to bring dishonour on a family because those are all signs that a girl is

getting westernized, which is what Asian families fight so hard against. They'd lock

up their daughters for months on end rather than let that happen (27).

Unlike physical abuse, though psychological abuse leaves no visible scars or bruises, it leaves

the victim in a traumatized state with low self –esteem.

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Conclusion

The upshot of the foregoing analytical presentation thus reveals that criminalization can serve as a vital weapon in the fight against forced marriage. Marriage is a positive and constructive social institution; it needs nurturing by both the spouses negating Francis Bacon's views in his essay *On Marriage*, "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune". There is so much to share, so much to learn together, and so much to discover. Women's voices are often invisible or less visible on account of migration, settlement and community formation. These gendered voices are born and brought up with the fear of not upsetting cultural sensitivities and the right choice regarding marriage is only the prerogative of the girl's parents thus leading to the suppression and loss of identity of girls and women.

Violence against women is said to have far-reaching consequences, harming families and communities. Such gender-based violence not only violates human rights, but also obstructs efficiency, reduces human resources and destabilizes financial growth forcing women to think as what Marilyn Monroe once said "It's better to be unhappy alone than unhappy with someone." So re-examining and redefining the status of women this crusade against forced marriage and honour killing seems to have given strength to the unheard voices to revolt and strike back in the words of J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "Not all those women who wander are lost" because if they do not raise their voice then it would again tantamount to violence, the violence of silence.

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