

The “Honor Killing” of Social Media Star Qandeel Baloch: Technological Change, the Changing Roles of Women, and Grassroots Backlash

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Abstract

The murder of Qandeel Baloch was just one of hundreds of "honor killings" that take place in Pakistan every year. However, because she was an outspoken social media star with more than 700,000 followers, her death brought attention to how social media has brought new focus to the evolving roles of women, has resulted in a grassroots backlash. At the same time, an examination of the specific accomplishments of Qandeel Baloch provide insight into a deeply and fascinatingly subversive artist who essentially invented herself, appropriating the tools and techniques of Western media sensations, and subsuming them in her own context(s). Further, an evaluation of what occurs in so-called "honor killings" makes it clear that "honor cultures" and violence toward women are universal, and the lessons learned in the death of Qandeel apply across the board, globally.

Introduction

“Oddly enough, those are two things that Pakistan does not deal with well: the Internet and “badly behaved women” -- Masterjee Bumbu

The outspoken model and social media celebrity Qandeel Baloch was killed by her brother on July 15, 2016, at her family’s home in Multan, Pakistan. The murder was an "honor killing" and it was a response to what her brother perceived as a loss of family honor due to the racy photos and videos, and her poses with a Muslim cleric where she donned his signature cap that she posted and disseminated through YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, where she had more than 700,000 followers, which was a staggering number, given that she primarily spoke in Urdu, which necessarily limited her reach.

Her brother, Waseem Azeem, was arrested a day later, and stated that while his sister (born Fauzia Azeem) provided resources, he found her behavior humiliating for the entire family. In an interview with the Associated Press, he said he could not endure what people were saying to him, and he had decided to either kill himself or her (CBS News, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/qandeel-baloch-brother-pakistan-murdered-honor-facebook-photos/>).

“Money matters, but family honor is more important,” explained Azeem (CBSNews.com) as he described how he administered sedatives and then suffocated her in her sleep. Their father, however, expressed outrage that his son murdered his own sister (regardless of "honor"), and rejected the notion that he would seek clemency.

Clearly, he considered it his duty to kill the errant family member who had taken several pages from the Kardashian playbook to "break" the Internet with provocative, openly sensual messages and videos. She also spoke out against Pakistan's patriarchal society and was an advocate for "girl power."

Honor Killings in Pakistan: Background and Contexts

Make no mistake. Pakistan does not condone honor killing, and Azeem will be charged with murder. According to changes in the law, unlike in the past, now in an honor killing, the family does not have the right to pardon him.

Nor does the church condone in any way honor killings. In fact, in June 2016, the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) restated the position it took in 1999 that honor killings are un-Islamic (BBC, 2016). The statement against honor killings followed a May 2016 release which expressed the position that it was permissible to engage in the "light beating" of women, which the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan immediately condemned as "ridiculous" (HRCP, 2016).

The HRCP, which maintains statistics on different types of human rights violations maintains a separate category entitled "Honour Crimes" and it covers both men and women. Between January 1 and July 15, 2016, at least 262 women were killed in an "honor killing." Of those, at least 44 were minors (hrcpmonitor.org, 2016).

The most prevalent reasons for the honor killing were illicit relations and marriage choice. Most of the suspected killers immediately went on the run, although some were apprehended into custody and a few surrendered voluntarily.

According to the HRCP, honor killings are on the rise in Pakistan, although it is difficult to determine to a precise degree, since many go unreported and occur in rural areas. The statistics that are gathered are based on monitoring reports in 15 newspapers and news websites, and reports from HRCP volunteers (hrcpmonitor.org, 2016).

Why are honor killings on the rise? There are many suggestions.

What Did Qandeel Do?

When Waasem Azeem was arrested, he expressed pride that he had killed his sister because she was bringing dishonor to the family by her scandalous poses in social media, which included a series of scandalous poses with a high-ranking cleric, an

offer to do a strip-tease for the Pakistani cricket team, a video in which she danced to a song warning her that she would be banned if she continued to move her hips the way she did, and increasingly political statements chiding officials and championing the rights of women.

Qandeel's presence was epitomized by a sense of humor, self-parody, and willingness to say outrageous things in order to get attention. In one of her most outrageous acts, she met with the Mufti Abdul Qavi, whose views on women were very conservative. Her selfies with him give a very compromising appearance as he appears to shed layers of clothing (in one photo, he's wearing a waistcoat and cap, and in another, he is waistcoat-less and capless). Qandeel poses wearing his signature cap. For Western readers, Qandeel's approach was playfully subversive. For world readers, she was alternately titillating, entertaining, liberating, and enraging. For her family, her behavior was scandalizing, even though her work as a model was the main source of income for them. An overview of Qandeel Baloch's life and impact appears on her Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialQandeelBaloch/videos/876282005849886/>

Perhaps Qandeel thought she would, Samson-like, topple pillars of the religious structures of the society as she interviewed a religious leader. She was a critic of patriarchy that often oppresses women. However, the interview was sufficiently scandalous that the powerful religious (and political) leader was suspended from his post. Qandeel did openly challenge the conservative culture and mindset around her and she invented and re-invented herself.

In a July 4, 2016 post on her Facebook account, Baloch wrote:

Atleast international media can see what i am upto. How i am trying to change the typical orthodox mindset of people who don't wanna come out of their shells of false beliefs and old practices. Here this one is for those people only. Thankyou my believers and supporters for understanding the message i try to convey through my bold posts and videos. It's time to bring a change because the world is changing. let's open our minds and live in present. 🌍
[#QandeelBaloch](#) [#TheSensation](#) [#BBC](#) [#BBCUK](#) [#Podcast](#)

Under the post, she posted a video that explored her persona and image:

<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialQandeelBaloch/videos/876282005849886/>

She thought of herself as a feminist, and in doing so, she followed in very auspicious footprints, including among many others, the ideas in such works as Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjugation of Women* (1869), and Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz's "Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz" (1691) in which Sor Juana defends women's right to knowledge.

In the 21st century communications technology milieu of the U.S., it's a bit hard to imagine that an Internet sensation could be capable of doing anything overtly politically shocking, particularly since it's the goal of social media and reality television to provoke a response. In fact, people will go to amazing extremes to go viral - even if what they are doing is self-destructive, reckless, or just plain ridiculous.

While it is tempting to look at Qandeel as rather derivative or imitative, the way that she appropriated social media, and both subverted and worked within the social media discursive framework, is worth noting.

From a somewhat different perspective, Qandeel's accomplishments included the following:

1. Intimacy that achieved remarkable levels, especially difficult to accomplish in a "nothing's private" world of the Internet. She posted videos on YouTube that showed extreme vulnerability and a need for approval (manifesting as a need to be found attractive), while inventing herself and a persona that is brash, outspoken, and calculated to both repel and attract the viewers in the very conservative Pakistan.

Love her or revile her, you could not stop watching. The reason was not because of Qandeel's singing or dancing talent, nor her beauty, but because she triggered an emotional response. Audiences confronted their own beliefs, and also found themselves (even some of their secret desires) reflected in a mirror that showed more than people wanted it to show.

2. Enacting and making visible the dynamic that usually stays invisible. Behind extreme enthusiasm for sports is a complex mélange of emotions in the fans. First, there is shared pride and projected identity. But, second, are emotions connected to flow, vitality, urge, and finally, sexuality. In the U.S., it is not uncommon to hear of female fans flinging themselves at famous athletes. The fact that athleticism connects to an eternal spring of reproduction is something usually veiled. But, not for Qandeel. Hence, the offer to strip for the Pakistani cricket team if they won their match in the World Cup, and when they lost to India, she performed a highly sensual dance for the Indian team.

3. Reinventing herself after marriage / motherhood. Her Internet name, Qandeel Blaloch, was not the one she was born with, nor was it her husband's name. Fauzia Azeem reinvented herself as Qandeel Blaloch, the provocative yet vulnerable self-actualizing, reifying selfie (and extended selfie) as well as the playful presence who liked to poke pins into the puffed up cultural authorities. She poked a pin in them, but they did not pop immediately, but you could see the air starting to go out of them. An example was her selfie video with the mufti Abdul Qavi ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v\]km3flB46g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v]km3flB46g)) as she spent time with him

breaking the fast in the hotel room where he was staying. It is not clear why they met, but she did at one point claim he was in love with her. Whether or not that was true is not clear. She also proposed to a cricket player on the national team who refused to even meet her in person.

It is worth noting that the individuals who had the real last name of Baloch had sued Qandeel for defiling their surname. Her brother listed the fact she had besmirched their name as one of his justifications.

4. Appropriation and reinvention of American pop-culture. We tend to think that Americans appropriate other cultures, both as a melting pot, and as a commodification of anything that moves. We forget that cultural appropriation cuts both ways.

Qandil take twerking and makes it her own. Twerking and other dance moves have been around for a long time, first in R&B / rap, and later in crossover acts such as Miley Cyrus's performances. It is customary to think of a global cultural colonialization via art and music, but Qandeel (and others) show an appropriation of, among other things, twerking, and making it completely her own. She does not have to get naked (Miley Cyrus) or engage in hyperactive choreographed frenetic sweating (no end to these!), but instead melds influences and makes the moves her own. They are, as in her other videos, remarkably touching -- perhaps because you see vulnerability and humor in the performance, and not simply raw libido.

In a television talk show in Pakistan, Qandeel is asked to dance, and her choreography, while labeled as "vulgar" by some, brings together traditional Pakistani dance with other influences. Again, she makes it her own.

<http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3fywjm>

In "Ban," which was published just 8 days before her death, Qandeel weaves in a variety of dance forms (twerking among them), and subsumes all within a Punjab narrative (<https://youtu.be/PtD72-js8dQ>) (I'm using the narrative to refer to discourse).

In a heartbeat, libido slipped into thanatos, and Qandeel is now the embodiment of the chiaroscuro, life-death dialectic one finds in the most enduring works of literature and art, including *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tristan and Isolde*, and others.

5. Toying with and taunting an important and respected person in the church and government. Qandeel like playing with fire. It is one thing to twerk and talk about stripping for a team while you're videoing selfies from your bed. It's another thing to orchestrate a series of selfies and a selfie-video that gives the impression that the religious leader has violated the most basic tenets of his own religion (fasting, abstinence, prayer, respect) to the point that he is stripped of his position, authority, and prestige.



Znews.com

Ambition and the pursuit of her goals impacted others, and resulted in collateral damage. Here we tread in uncharted territory. In fact, Qandeel's brother said the selfies with the mufti provoked him into resolutely deciding to murder his sister, and presumably restore the family's honor.

Nowhere does the Koran condone what he did, and if he did actually manage to restore the family's honor by murdering someone for behaving badly, it was an illusion, and would only appear to be the case because of misinterpretation and a kind of collective social delusion about the law and the church's edicts.

Honor Culture, Honor Killings

The usual knee-jerk reaction to the killing of someone who has been offensive or somehow transgressive usually involves condemning the entire culture, wholesale. Certainly, the murder of people who annoy, shock, scandalize, or deliver unpopular messages can never be condoned.

But, it's more complex than that, and we certainly can't throw stones when our own culture has its own severe ways of dealing with individuals who transgress social norms. Sex and sexuality may no longer be the "hot button" but certainly the perceived attempt to humiliate or cause harm can result in catastrophic reprisals.

1. Men are victims, too, in honor cultures.

While brothers or fathers who conduct the "honor killing" may claim to feel they did what they had to do to defend the honor of their family, there must be a psychological toll. To feel compelled to kill someone is painful, and it brings to mind the honor cultures of the past, where duels were obligatory if one's honor was besmirched.

In the statistics maintained by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the number of men murdered or victims of "honor killings" is lower than that of women, but men are killed. The reasons most cited were for marrying against the family's wishes and for behavior outside marriage.

Most cultures seem to pass through an “honor culture” phase, and in doing so, there are severe limitations to personal autonomy and self-determination.

2. Can you culturally quarantine your black sheep?

There are awkward tensions between individual and collective identity. In a culture that focuses on the individual and individual accomplishment, if a family member misbehaves, then a great effort is made to distance them and say that each person is responsible for their own choices. Rehab it is. Or, exile. The individual is quarantined, in essence, and it is not necessary to kill them to eliminate their threat, although it may be necessary to train family members to stop feeding the black sheep.

3. What is “honor” in times of rapid social change?

In a collectivist, “high context” culture such as that of Pakistan, individual identity and reputation are often linked to a group affiliation, which can be a tribe, family, political unit, or community.

In the traditional Punjab culture, gender roles are very clearly defined, and the family unit survived by careful resource management. Marriage is a business and political union, and the man and wife are expected to respect each other, and potentially grow to love each other. Romantic love has no place in the marriage, which was traditionally arranged as a negotiation between families.

Any family member who does not behave in accordance with social norms runs the risk of damaging the family honor, which in turn determines the survivability of the entire family. The worst situation is for the family to lose honor, and thus lose the ability to maintain one’s position in society, one’s livelihood, and general survivability.

In times of rapid social change, the rules and limitations that once constrained people’s lives often loosen, and with education, communication, and a global framework, it’s possible to find employment and livelihood in the new world order. As a result, women can (and do) find independent means of funding themselves and their families. Sometimes (as in the case of Qandeel), the methods are completely at odds with the old social order.

Institutions (church, government, workplace) evolve with the changing times, but they tend to be a step behind, except in cases of totalitarian autocracy, when the populace is catapulted into modernity, such as in the case of Kamal Ataturk in early 20th century Turkey.

The murder of the woman who represents change is also an attempt on the part of the murderer to nullify changes. His actions represent the extreme position of the person who craves the social order of the past where he occupied (or at least thought himself capable of occupying) a position of prestige. More than a nostalgic

longing for what is past, the “honor killing” represents a violent rejection, and on some level, a sickeningly satisfying rage for order.

To the man who murders for “honor,” the reality he cannot face is a world where honor means nothing, and honor gets you nowhere. Instead, shock, shame and transgression are the new tickets to fame and glory.

Conclusion: The Lesson Is Universal

I have found myself questioning whether or not I should write about this topic since I do not live in Pakistan and I do not have first-hand knowledge of the social context.

However, honor killings as such do occur outside Pakistan; according to statistics, they also occur in India, Afghanistan, Turkey, and in the U.S. and the U.K.

And, once we accept that an “honor killing” is nothing more than a rationalizing label affixed to murder, the case becomes very clear. Murder of “badly-behaved” women happens quite frequently in many different cultures.

Here are a few thoughts about “honor killings” and the murder of women who make people feel uncomfortable.

1. Technology-driven social change can have unexpected consequences.

Technology that accelerates societal change seems to always come with an evolution of the social order, whether it be the family structure, the government, the institutions, or all of the above. In the case of technology, it often expands the opportunities for individuals to be independent, and the education that is necessary has the effect of opening many doors.

Women and the traditionally powerless suddenly have the ability to choose the direction for their own lives, with an unprecedented level of self-determination. There is a new sense of liberty.

But, there is often a tug of war between “liberty” and “libertinism” -- and those who use their liberty to become libertines often fall apart in self-destruction and dissolution.

Further, a culture that privileges “libertinism” over true “liberty” may move from a manufacturing or agricultural base to one that emphasizes entertainment. The issue is one that seems to accompany rapid social and political change. For example, Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) explores in *My Lady Ludlow* (1858) the difference between liberty and libertinism in the changes following the French Revolution.

Many critics of a consumer culture have pointed to the commodification of the female body to simply accelerate the pace of consumption of ephemeral goods or

activities. The woman who is able to shape her own role as a model and to self-promote can, in theory, empower herself. However, the capitalist structure that makes it possible still remains outside the body of the woman being used. So, like it or not, she is simply being used (while she is young) to sell products (or to be a product herself).

The first tragedy is that Qandeel Baloch was murdered because she was inconvenient for someone else.

The second tragedy is that Qandeel Baloch never really transcended the fact that others were using her body for their own purposes. Perhaps it was not for producing children or tending to family members in the traditional conservative role, but her "liberty" played into the libertine desires of a consumer culture, and she was complicit in her own commodification.

If she had lived longer, perhaps she could have built her own advertising agency or her own product line. Then she could have had one foot in each economic modality: manufacturing and entertainment.

At any rate, the question to be asked is, for the young woman aspiring to be a success in a celebrity culture, and who wishes to use the means at her disposal (social media) to achieve that goal, what is the end game? For the one who wants to create her own celebrity (rather than facilitating the celebrity of another), what is the actual trajectory of likely outcomes, especially given that celebrity is often fleeting, and for those who managed to make themselves (like zombies or other undead) unkillable (like Madonna), we are faced with watching a spectacle we no longer enjoy except as it produces memories for us, like a step into a time machine.

The irony is that in death Qandeel is more commodifiable than ever, and she is likely to achieve more sales / attention than she ever did or could have in life.

Her instant martyrdom makes the tragedy of her brother's life-ending (for his own life as well) doubly painful. He killed her to "defend the family's honor" (and ostensibly expunge her bad behavior and artifacts and restore the family to their pristine, unstained condition) and yet more people than ever will see her. He said he would either kill himself or kill her. He did both.

2. Violence against women occurs across the globe. There may not be as many honor killings in Western countries, potentially because we live in a less collectivist culture, and the individual is considered to be responsible for his or her own reputation. "Family honor" does not seem to matter too much except in political dynasties or small towns. The black sheep would be sent to rehab or to the big city. Then, if they're financially successful, all they have to do is build a mansion, drive expensive cars, and start donating to foundations.

Even if there are not honor killings, violence against women is on the rise. Women are sexually, physically, and psychologically savaged at work and at home. Intimate partner violence is a significant problem. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), once every 20 minutes an intimate partner is the victim of violence in the United States (CDC, 2014).

There are many reasons for intimate partner violence. Much has to do with poor stress and anger management. However, more than anything is the reality is that it is a social phenomenon and a learned behavior, and underlying collective beliefs and attitudes about women perpetuate / promulgate the behaviors. Further, the problem is compounded when the individual starts to internalize the negative psychological impacts, and starts to believe they deserve the bad behavior, or that it is somehow the norm and inevitable.

Honor killings in Pakistan and intimate partner violence in the United States probably have more in common than they have differences. And, so, we can learn from each, and possibly start to work with the vectors of socialization (institutions such as families, communities, churches, schools) to internalize unconditional respect, as well as stress and anger management techniques that actually work.

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