

## Traditional Ignominies

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To be born a Pakistani is to be born with the life-long burden of trying to make sense of cultural practices that frequently are unintelligible, incomprehensible, and monstrous, like the panchayat-sanctioned gang rape of Mukhtaran Bibi as a way to avenge tribal “honor.” At first, I was too overcome by rage, shame, and sorrow to want to write about it, but I realize that keeping silent in the face of this latest ignominy would be to yield up too much to its perpetrators and even to become complicit in it through inaction.

It’s not as if the rape or its circumstances were unusual, as many people have pointed out. Hatred and violence towards women are the bedrock of the feudal-tribal culture that masquerades as “Islamic” in Pakistan. What may be unusual is that enough people who matter have decided to make this rape actionable. However, it is unlikely that any action can deliver justice for a rape victim in a society that views them as “damaged goods.”

So far, critics have focused—perhaps understandably—on the panchayat and the police. It was, after all, the panchayat that authorized the rape and, to many, the panchayat is the most representative form of self-governance, hence democracy; though how anyone can regard as democratic an exclusively male body that helps to keep in place reprehensible traditions is beyond me. In fact, this atrocity proves once and for all that self-governance may not be democratic or even representative. In other words, a democracy in form may not necessarily be a democracy in content, a lesson that has been proven time and again by elected regimes (which is not, however, to endorse militarism).

As for the police, it is true that such incidents cannot occur without its knowledge or tacit consent; indeed it is not unusual for the agents of law enforcement themselves to violate the law much of the time. However, blaming only the police and the panchayat or the 200 odd villagers who stood by as onlookers to the rape obscures the fact that Pakistanis for the most part—in spite of their claims to being moderate—countenance, if they do not actively promote, the abuse and degradation of women in the name of honor, tradition, or religion. The police, the panchayat, and the villagers are all products of a social matrix in which tradition, culture, and misogynistic interpretations of religion intersect to produce a view of women as “paoon ki jooti” (a slipper, to be changed at a man’s will). That such views should generate ritualized rape, the “honor” killing of women and karo-kari, where women are exchanged like commodities, is then hardly surprising. Crimes against women don’t count for much because women themselves don’t count for much.

I have heard enough people blame Islam for such debased views of women to have spent the last several years researching and writing about the interpretive strategies by means of which the precept of male superiority and female inequality and subordination to men has been projected onto the Qur’an (*“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*, University of Texas Press, 2002). I have found that the Qur’an does not, in fact, elevate men in their biological capacity as males over women, notwithstanding customary exegesis of the verses on the “degree” that men have over

women, “wife-beating,” the giving of evidence, polygyny, etc. Not only that, but the Qur’an prohibits killing girls or keeping them on sufferance and outlaws all those actions that constitute a rape, such as lust, sex outside marriage, and taking women against their will (the Qur’an extends the notion of will even to female slaves, countering their sexual objectification). Further, it counsels sexual chastity for men and women, equally.

As Pakistan’s case illustrates, however, the Qur’an’s teachings have been buried under the rubble of preIslamic customs that continue to thrive in this “Islamic” Republic. To elevate these traditions over the teachings of the Qur’an constitutes a double heresy both because the traditions explicitly violate its teachings and because the Qur’an itself is unremittently critical of blind adherence to tradition. As it tell us, whenever God

sent a Warner

Before thee [the Prophet] to any people

The wealthy ones among them

Said: ‘We found our fathers

Following a certain religion,

And we will certainly

Follow in their footsteps.’

He [the Warner] said: ‘What!

Even if I brought you

Better guidance than that

Which ye found

Your fathers following?’

. . .

So We exacted retribution

From them: now see

What was the end

Of those who rejected (Truth)

(43: 23-25; in Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur’an*, 1989: 1328-29).

Similarly, it is the Arabs’ imprudent embrace of their traditions that keeps them from heeding the Prophet’s call to the right path, as another ayah makes clear:

When it is said to them:

‘Come to what God

Hath revealed; come

To the Apostle:’

They say: ‘enough for us

Are the ways we found

Our fathers following.’

What! Even though their fathers

Were void of knowledge

And guidance?

(5:10; in Ali, 275).

One can read these ayat narrowly or, more universally and timelessly, as illustrating the natural conflict between monotheism and patriarchal tradition for, what else is patriarchal tradition but following the “ways of the fathers?” How is it that when people speak of “Islamization” they never speak about the radical iconoclasm of the Qur’an’s teachings that undercut the core of patriarchal power as it has been defined historically?

Meanwhile, we need to devise a fitting punishment for rape. Customarily, Muslims have reverted to stoning to death, but the Qur’an does not prescribe stoning for any crime. (The Prophet once sanctioned the stoning of a Jewish man and woman taken in adultery because he was applying Jewish law to them.) Shahid Nadeem suggested castration (July 10) and it certainly fits the crime. Since the men who kill and rape women seem to have a notion of honor that is tied to their reproductive organs, that would be the logical place to start if one wants to change their ideas about (self-)respect.

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