

Comprehending and Critiquing the Concept of 'Honour' in Contemporary Muslim Communities

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Abstract

The notion of 'honour', a term encapsulating a complex of meanings around pride, reputation, shame, and so on has increasingly become an important talking point over the past few decades, through media coverage, activist campaigns and within academic literature. The attention to 'honour' has been specifically projected onto 'honour-based' crimes and murders especially in Muslim communities in the UK and abroad. Yet deeper analysis of this umbrella term and the broader implications of its impact on the lives of Muslim women in particular have been greatly overlooked.

In this paper, I examine the implications of contemporary 'honour' ideals and praxis on the lives of Muslim women, offering an in-depth critique of the very notion of 'honour' itself. I examine the contemporary Muslim 'honour' paradigm focusing on how 'honour' is manifested within Muslim communities. Focusing specifically on terminology, I address the challenges of using the English term 'honour', which results in subjective Western understandings and experiences being universalised in the study of contemporary 'honour'-endorsing Muslim communities. Further, I explore the analytical and methodological challenges of trans-contextualisation of terms and ideologies that arise from traditional understandings of Arabic terms referring to 'honour', as they appear in early Islamic authoritative sources. I thus argue that in order to challenge negative 'honour' praxis in the lives of Muslim women, the notion of 'honour' itself must be reconceptualised using frameworks from within honour-endorsing Muslim communities, which in turn will allow more analytical depth and nuance, and form a starting point for discussions about how to combat negative readings of 'honour' that are detrimental to the wellbeing of Muslim women.

Introduction

The notion of 'honour', a term encapsulating a complex of meanings around pride, reputation, shame, and so on has increasingly become an important talking point over the past few decades, through media coverage, activist campaigns and within academic literature. The attention to 'honour' has been specifically projected onto 'honour-based' crimes and murders especially in Muslim communities in the UK and abroad. Yet deeper analysis of this umbrella term and the broader implications of its impact on the lives of Muslim women in particular have been greatly overlooked. In this paper, I examine the broader implications of contemporary 'honour' ideals and praxis on the lives of Muslim women, alongside methodological challenges that arise from attempts of reconceptualising honour.

This paper shall examine the broader manifestations and challenges of the concept of 'honour' within contemporary Muslim communities. It shall present various beliefs and practices found within these communities that are influenced by, or emphasise, an 'honour' ideology which, I argue form the contemporary Muslim honour paradigm. After appreciating the extensive impact of 'honour' ideologies upon the lives of Muslim women, aside from 'honour' crimes and killings, this paper shall explore the challenges of comprehending and reconceptualising the notion of 'honour', specifically focusing on issues pertaining to terminology. I shall explore two forms of challenges that arise from terminology. Firstly, I shall focus on the implications of using the English term 'honour' when exploring beliefs and practices of communities and people that have developed from Arabic specific terms of 'honour' and from a non-Western history. Secondly, I shall present the challenges relating to trans-contextualisation of early understandings and practices relating to 'honour' as they appear within early Islamic authoritative sources. Ultimately this paper shall argue that the concept of 'honour', an over-loaded term, and its holistic impact on Muslim women must be comprehended and critiqued if we are to reconceptualise 'honour' ideologies and ultimately overcome gender bias patriarchal practices that are informed by the 'honour' system.

The Contemporary Muslim Honour Paradigm

'Honour', in relation to Muslim communities, has increasingly been associated and limited to 'honour' crimes and murders. However, upon examining various other gender bias beliefs and practices, present within Muslim 'honour-endorsing' communities, it becomes apparent that many of these beliefs and praxis hold an intimate relationship with the belief system attributed to 'honour'. Practices relating to control of female sexuality, strict dress codes, female gentile mutilation, strict marriage practices, gender segregation, gender specific roles, and the overall limited agency of Muslim women can all be found to be either emphasised by an 'honour' belief system or conversely, they can be seen as mechanisms emphasising an 'honour' ideology (Akpinar, 2003). Despite the complex nature of the 'honour' system within Muslim communities, our limited associations and examination to 'honour' crimes and killings results in us only focusing on the consequence of an 'honour' ideology and therefore, overlooking and diminishing the broader implications of the contemporary Muslim 'honour' paradigm.

The 'honour' paradigm, I argue, is a system within which various beliefs and practices, some of which will be examined in the following, are used to emphasise and maintain an 'honour' ideology. Accordingly, the existence of these beliefs and practices is also emphasised and ensured through the ideology of 'honour'. Therefore, I argue of the existence of a multilateral relationship between various gender-bias beliefs and practices with the concept and ideology of 'honour'. In terms of 'honour' crimes and killings, which are increasingly identified as the ultimate manifestation of 'honour' within the Islamicate, these are the consequences to deviances, transgressions and critiques of the various beliefs and practices within the 'honour' paradigm. In order to fully comprehend the manifestations of the 'honour' paradigm, within Muslim communities, and its impact on Muslim women the various praxis and beliefs that contribute to the belief system must be acknowledged and critiqued.

The scope of this paper will unfortunately not permit a detailed critique of all practices and beliefs that can be seen as manifestations of 'honour'. Thus, I shall briefly explore three manifestations of the 'honour' paradigm: female sexuality, female gentile mutilation and virginity, and female intellectual agency. Despite these not being readily associated to the 'honour' system, their existence and emphasise within Muslim communities proves contrary.

Female Sexuality

One of the major ideologies embedded within the 'honour' paradigm that contributes to various other practices and beliefs that impact the lives of Muslim women is the ideology of controlling female sexuality. The desire to control female sexuality transcends ethnic and geographic boundaries. It is an ideology that influences perceptions of virginity, gender segregation, dress/veiling and female gentile mutilation (Akpinar, 2003, p.429). The ideology of female sexuality has been examined extensively within academic works however, its association to an 'honour' system has been greatly overlooked. When examining the justifications and motivation to controlling female sexuality it becomes apparent that the desire to maintain 'honour' is central in efforts to control female sexuality. In her examination of 'honour' and shame within modern Iraq Sana Al-Khayyat highlights various contemporary 'honour' beliefs and practices. She presents how contemporary Muslim 'honour' ideologies and praxis are greatly concerned with female sexuality and notions of family and kinship (Al-Khayyat, 1992, p.21).

The most important connotation of honour in the Arab world is related to the sexual conduct of women. If a woman is immodest or brings shame on her family by her sexual conduct, she brings shame and dishonour on all her kin (Al-Khayyat, 1992, p.21)

The centrality of female sexuality to family and communal 'honour' is not exclusive to the Arab world. This patriarchal stance regarding 'honour' can be located in various Muslim communities. The emphasis on sexuality to preserve 'honour' relates to broader patriarchal notions of family and gender norms. Communities endorsing strong 'honour' beliefs and values perceive the female body as open and the male body closed. Thus, the open body must be protected to prevent it from becoming impure, contaminated or violated (Akpinar, 2003). These ideals regarding controlling female sexuality are embedded within patrilineal ideals. Guarding their bodies is a means of keeping the lineage pure. 'The chastity of women' must be assured by externally imposed restraints because women are believed to have no internal, self-restraints.' (Akpinar, 2003, p.432). Beliefs regarding the structure of the family

unit and the status of women all contribute to how women are policed, and the desire to control their sexuality. These patriarchal beliefs and practices are a major component of the contemporary Muslim 'honour' paradigm.

Female Gentile Mutilation and Virginit

The desire to control female sexuality in order to preserve 'honour' is so central to some African Muslim communities that its ideas can be found instilled within practices such as female gentile mutilation (FGM). FGM, although it can be seen as an African specific practice, is an example of a practical manifestation of 'honour'. I associate this practice to the 'honour' paradigm as it is clearly reflected in the justifications for the practice as being to control female sexuality in order to maintain 'honour'. Nawal El-Saadawi in her book entitled *The Hidden Face of Eve*, presents how FGM relates to female sexuality and honour (El-Saadawi, 2015). 'The importance given to virginity and an intact hymen in these societies is the reason why female circumcision still remains a very widespread practice despite a growing tendency, especially in urban Egypt, to do away with it as something outdated and harmful.' (El-Saadawi, 2015, p.67). Beliefs influenced by 'honour' ideals are what emphasise such practices. Those who practise FGM believe it will allow a girl or woman to protect her virginity, as sexual desires are minimized thus, allowing her to preserve her 'honour'. Within these 'honour-endorsing' communities we see the existence of a pressure to remain a virgin before marriage.

Although FGM is practiced predominantly in African communities, the apparent obsession with female virginity within Muslim communities is more widespread. Virginity and 'honour' can be seen as synonymous for such communities. Yet, the desire to preserve 'honour' can paradoxically lead to the manipulation of women and their 'honour'. Rather than protecting women and maintaining so-called 'honour', we find that such beliefs can leave women in vulnerable circumstances due to the fear of losing their 'honour'. This fear can become so extreme that seeking justice for women who have been sexually harassed or abused can be seen as dishonourable. El-Saadawi highlights how strong the desire and need to preserve 'honour' is within many Muslim communities. In terms of rape or sexual assault, 'even if [a woman] says something, or if the man is caught at the actual moment of sexual aggression, the family will hush up what has happened and refuse to go to court of law, in order to preserve the honour of the family and its reputation intact.' (El-Saadawi, 2015, p.39). The criminal in such instances is free, safe from the consequences of his actions, whereas for the victim, 'her hymen is her honour and, once lost, it can never be replaced' (El-Saadawi, 2015, p.39).

The honour or chastity of a girl is likened to a matchstick that can only burn once and then is over. Once a girl has lost her virginity, therefore, she has irrevocably lost her honour, and can never retrieve it. A man's honour has nothing to do with his chastity. On the contrary, his chastity, can be burnt a hundred, nay a thousand times, but he will never lose his honour or consume it (El-Saadawi, 2015, p.84)

This obsession with maintaining virginity does not take into consideration that the hymen of a woman can tear without her engaging in sexual intercourse. For some 'honour-endorsing' communities, white bed sheets not being stained with the blood of a woman on her wedding night after her first experience of intercourse is proof of her dishonour. The aforementioned views and practices surrounding female virginity have further led to contemporary medical practices of restoring virginity through hymen reconstruction surgery (Khan, 2006, p.15). Tahira S Khan states:

What makes these young girls and their mothers go through surgical repair of the hymen is not the first night's pleasure of the husband. It is a fear of shame and loss of honour. A broken hymen can bring death to young girls on charges of fornication and premarital sexual affairs, which is not permissible in Middle Eastern societies, whether Syria, Jordan, Palestine or Egypt (Khan, 2006, p.15)

The existence of such a belief system influenced by 'honour' can be seen to impact women within the contemporary in a manner that leaves them vulnerable and subject to mistreatment and abuse. Despite a dominant patriarchal view that such 'honour' beliefs and practices will save women from

losing 'honour' and bringing disgrace upon themselves and their families on the contrary, these beliefs appear to expose Muslim women as easy targets to be manipulated and silenced.

Intellectual Agency

Aside from beliefs and practices that influence the practical agency of Muslim women, the 'honour' system also emphasises a desired mind-set and mental capacity of the ideal honourable Muslim women. This is practically achieved through attempts to limit female education rights and their overall intellectual agency.

Ignorance about the body and its functions in girls and women is considered a sign of honour, purity and good morals and if, in contrast, a girl does know anything about sex and about her body, it is considered something undesirable and even shameful. A mature woman with experience and knowledge of life is looked upon as being less worthy than a simple, naïve and ignorant woman. Experience is looked upon almost as a deformity to be hidden, and not as a mark of intrinsic human value (El-Saadawi, 2015, p.58)

It is apparent that contemporary gender-biased 'honour' beliefs and practices not only intend to impact and minimise the agency of Muslim women, but they also seek to control and contribute to the construction of a limited mental capacity of women. The most obvious motive for the above is to ensure the maintenance of 'honour' in line with the patriarchal family structure.

It should be noted that the aforementioned beliefs and practices cannot be argued as dominantly practiced throughout every Muslim community. In reality, the extent of these practices and beliefs vary from community to community. Nevertheless, some form of most of these beliefs and practices can be found within the majority of Muslim communities. Moreover, their existence is dominantly in relation to an 'honour' belief system. Although, all manifestations of 'honour' have not been explored it is clear that the ideology of honour has much broader implications on the lives of Muslim women, aside from crimes and killings. Therefore, in order to challenge and overcome 'honour' crimes and killings we must begin by challenging and reconceptualising the very beliefs and practices that lead to these atrocities. In order to do this, we must begin by comprehending and critiquing the very notion of 'honour' within 'honour-endorsing' Muslim communities.

Methodological Challenges

Yet comprehending and critiquing the notion of 'honour' comes with various analytical and methodological challenges. These challenges not only impact how we perceive 'honour' today, however they have also impacted the way 'honour' has developed and transformed throughout history into the contemporary. Moreover, it is these challenges that impact our attempts to reconceptualise negative 'honour' ideologies.

There are various challenges that arise when attempting to comprehend a notion and further critique this notion, when it exists within a variety of Muslim communities across the world with varying ethnic, geographic, cultural, economic and social factors. Furthermore, such an examination being embedded in theological expressions, and historical and contemporary experiences results in further challenges. However, in order to fully grasp the stance, developments and transformations of 'honour' within Muslim communities are an essential point of examination. Within the following I focus on two specific challenges that arise from such an examination: the use of the English term 'honour' and Arabic terms for 'honour'.

The first, addressing the challenges of using the English term 'honour', is a challenge associated with examining 'honour' within the contemporary, specifically in spaces where the term 'honour' has been applied to Muslim communities. The second challenge, dealing with trans-contextualisation of Arabic 'honour' terms, is related to how terms from the primary Islamic sources of authority and accounts of historical Muslim communities, have developed and been transferred or transformed into the contemporary.

Our comprehension of the notion of 'honour' and resultant practices that we see within the West cannot be assumed relevant or applicable to non-Western 'honour' practices and beliefs. It is clear from researchers such as Frank Henderson Stewart, in his book *Honor*, that the English term 'honour' has its own very specific history, a Western history (Stewart, 1994). The development of the term is related to

the communities and cultures within which the term transformed. Thus, our perception of ‘honour’ within the West and our consequent attitudes, beliefs and practices in relation to ‘honour’ are associated to a Western history. Assuming this history and Western usage of the term ‘honour’ as relevant to communities foreign to the West, is to assume that Western history and experiences are universal. Salman Sayyid, in his book entitled *A fundamental fear: eurocentrism and the emergence of Islamism*, quotes Edward Said who states, ‘the study of the Islamic world has to move away from the assumptions that it can be defined by distortion of features that are considered ‘normal’ within Western history’ (Sayyid, 2003, p.vii).

Oyeronke Oyewumi, in her book entitled, *The invention of Women: making an African sense of Western gender discourse*, addresses this crucial issue relating to western gender discourse (Oyewumi, 1997). Oyewumi brings light to the challenges we face due to ‘relying on disciplinary theories and conceptual debates originating in and dominated by the West’, resulting in our research questions not being generated from local conditions (Oyewumi, 1997, p.ix). Further, we can easily fall into the trap of treating western categories and constructions as universal. She emphasises how ‘all concepts come with their own cultural and philosophical baggage, much of which becomes alien distortion when applied to cultures other than those from which they derive.’ (Oyewumi, 1997, p.x-xi).

Similarly, aside from challenges of the English term ‘honour’, challenges from Arabic terms also arise. The analytical and methodological challenges of trans-contextualisation of terms and ideologies that arise from traditional understandings of Arabic terms referring to ‘honour’, impact the way ‘honour’ has been transmitted and perceived within contemporary Muslim communities. Taking understandings of Arabic honour terms from historical Muslim communities and applying them to contemporary Muslim communities assumes these understandings to be ahistorical and to transcend socio-historical context. This in itself hugely problematic yet is readily done within conservative Muslim communities.

Terminology, both in English and Arabic, therefore contribute to the manner in which we conceptualise ‘honour’. Use of the English term ‘honour’ without critique and cautiousness of its specific history can result in us treating western conceptions of ‘honour’ as universal. Further it can impact the way we comprehend and interact with ‘honour’ beliefs and practices in non-Western communities. However, at the same time, the term has been so dominantly associated to certain beliefs and practices in the Muslim world that removing its use will bring no justice in attempting to reconceptualise ‘honour’. Similarly, certain Arabic terms are perceived to transcend historical context, resulting in ideologies of ‘honour’ that are irrelevant to contemporary Muslim context, being perceived as definite. Although an extensive discussion of these challenges is beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear that the very methods and terminologies used to examine ‘honour’ are problematic in themselves.

Conclusion

To conclude, in order to overcome the aforementioned methodological challenges and the broader challenges of the contemporary Muslim ‘honour’ paradigm I propose reconceptualising ‘honour’ through frameworks developed within a Muslim context. Taking into consideration the broader impact of ‘honour’ on the lives of Muslim women I argue that ‘honour’ cannot and should not be solely comprehended through ‘honour’ crimes and killings. Moreover, the current contemporary considerations of ‘honour’ within Muslim communities is extremely reliant on Western conceptions of ‘honour’. This comprehension of ‘honour’ must be extended to within Muslim context, Islam and its sources of authority.

If we are to reconceptualise ‘honour’ ideologies and ultimately overcome gender bias patriarchal practices that are informed by the ‘honour’ system, we must be ready to comprehend ‘honour’ in the language of those who endorse and emphasise such a system. I argue that in order to challenge negative ‘honour’ praxis in the lives of Muslim women, the notion of ‘honour’ itself must be reconceptualised using frameworks from within ‘honour-endorsing’ Muslim communities, which in turn will allow more analytical depth and nuance, and form a starting point for discussions about how to combat negative readings of ‘honour’ that are detrimental to the wellbeing of Muslim women.

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