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RETELLING OPHELIA'S STORY THROUGH SABA: HAMLET
REVISITED IN A GIRL IN THE RIVER

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare has become a global icon in the academic as well as non-academic worlds to such an extent that the name Shakespeare is almost synonymous with literature. It is mainly because his themes are universal that they appeal to readers around the world. Due to this universal appeal, in the present decade, Shakespeare's plays are adapted and appropriated across the globe, which includes Pakistan too. The plays attract Pakistani readers because of the presence of numerous parallels between them and modern-day Pakistan. There is a rise in Pakistani adaptations of Shakespeare's plays; however, fewer comparative studies on similar grounds are carried out in the country. Therefore, this paper focuses on the comparison between Shakespeare's Hamlet and A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015) by Sharmeen

Obaid Chinoy. Set against the background of patriarchy and the subsequent mistreatment and subjugation of women, the two have much in common. This paper draws a parallel between the two texts and, by doing so, demonstrates the potential they have to address modern-day Pakistani problems related to patriarchy, mistreatment, and subjugation of women. This paper, essentially qualitative in nature, takes into consideration Catherine Belsey's Textual Analysis and Sylvia Walby's Theory of Patriarchy (1990).

INTRODUCTION

Drama serves the purposes of entertainment, enlightenment, and social reformation. More importantly, drama, in its own peculiar way, is used as a medium to highlight socio-cultural-political problems in any given society. The problems that are otherwise hard to express explicitly are represented and expressed through the medium of drama. Drama, in this case, serves the purpose of social reformation, and as such, it has the means and power to potentially challenge stereotypes as well as taboo topics. According to Zia (2014), drama has been instrumental 'for propaganda, publicity, and to create awareness about various social issues' (p.1391). He further adds that "drama has a strong emotional involvement for the audience" (p.1391). In addition, this medium provides a safe platform to do so. In other words, it is a safe form of criticism.

Elaborating upon the role of drama in Pakistan and its use as a medium to reach any given audience, Zia (2014) argues that drama through television is a hybrid medium that is a 'combination of theatre, newsprint, radio and film' (p. 1391). Thus, drama in Pakistan has the potential to not only entertain people but to highlight any given socio-cultural problem where the characters are lifelike and the issues are real. Issues that we may see in newspapers and print media or hear over the radio are reflected in Pakistani dramas.

The mistreatment of women in Pakistan is one such pressing issue that we see from time to time in Pakistani media reports (based on real-life facts and incidents). To name a few, these mistreatments include domestic violence and abuse, harassment, forced or forced-arranged marriages, acid attacks, rapes, and honour killings. Taking only one of these problems into consideration, if anyone searches for "acid attacks in Pakistan," a long list of news articles appears regarding the subject at hand. The following are a few of the titles that appeared when the researchers searched Google for acid attacks in Pakistan: Growing acid attacks in Pakistan (Pakistan Today, 2021), Pakistani women's lives destroyed by acid attacks (BBC News, 2012), A man attacks a woman with acid in Lahore for refusing marriage (Gabol, 2021), and Karachi sees an alarming increase in acid attacks (Khan, 2021). Keeping in view the rise in the number of cases of acid attacks, a fully operational Acid Survivor Foundation (ASF) has been established in Pakistan.

Modern-day Pakistani dramas tend to highlight and address these mentioned issues. The most recent examples of such dramas are *Sang-e-Mar Mar* (2016) and *Sang-e-Mah* (2022), which focus on the problems faced by Pakistani women in relation to patriarchy and the subsequent related honor. Patriarchy, subjugation of women, and honour have been the themes of many dramas by Shakespeare too. Whether it is the character of Ophelia in *Hamlet* or Katherine in *Taming of the Shrew*, we see reflections of how women were treated in

Elizabethan times/Shakespearean plays, which is not very much different from the treatment of modern-day women in Pakistani drama. Modern Shakespeare criticism recognizes and demonstrates the modern relevance of Shakespeare's plays. There is a rise in adaptations and appropriations of the Shakespearean plays. Pakistan is no different in adapting the plays of Shakespeare and appropriating them into Pakistan's socio-cultural context. The Taming of the Shrew as *Ilaaj-i-Zia Dastyaab Hay* (2012) and *The Winter's Tale* as *Fasana-e-Ajaib* (2014) are two of the many examples where the counterpart plays of Shakespeare are appropriated and adapted into a Pakistani context. Both the dramas as well as the subsequent adaptations deal with the concept of patriarchy, subjugation and mistreatment of women, and honour.

As mentioned above, there is a rise in the comparative study of the plays of Shakespeare and their modern-day Pakistani adaptations to highlight and address contemporary problems. However, there is an equal and dire need for similar yet different comparative studies of the plays of Shakespeare and similar relevant Pakistani dramas, films, and documentaries serving the same purpose and offering more plausible solutions. As a result, this paper offers and investigates a comparison of Hamlet and the Oscar-winning film, *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* (2015) by Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy. *A Girl in the River* retells the story of a real-life nineteen-year-old girl, Saba. Saba survived an honour killing attempt by her father and uncle. She had defied the wishes and orders of her father and had married a man of her own choice.

Problems related to patriarchy, such as subjugation and mistreatment of women's honor, are common in Pakistan, and the number of awareness programs addressing them is growing. Research has been carried out on the subject at hand; however, limited or no research has been conducted on the comparison of Hamlet and *A Girl in the River* to address the problems related to patriarchy, especially in terms of subjugation and mistreatment of women and women-related honour. Therefore, this paper focuses on the subject at hand through the medium of drama/documentary, that is, Hamlet and *A Girl in the River*. Ophelia in Hamlet is similar to Saba in *A Girl in the River*. Both have much in common. In a similar way, the way Ophelia is expected to behave and live around Hamlet, in similar way, Saba is expected to do the same. It is pertinent to mention that the character of Saba is frequently found in Pakistan and that women are expected to behave not like to Saba so as not end up like her as a victim of honour killing/acid attacks. Saba is a real-life character that is compared with the fictional character of Ophelia. Ophelia may be a fictional character, but her treatment is no different than Saba's. The focus here is how women are subjugated and mistreated in both and how Hamlet has the potential to address Pakistan's contemporary problems related to women.

Through Saba, *A Girl in the River* questions the wrongly attributed definitions of patriarchy and women-related honour in Pakistan. Similarly, through Ophelia, who suffers the same as Saba, Hamlet questions the very mistreatment of women. Therefore, this paper provides a comparative study of Hamlet and *A Girl in the River* and provides a detailed comparison of Ophelia and Saba, respectively. By doing so, this paper explores and demonstrates (at the same time) the potential of Hamlet to address the contemporary problems related to

patriarchy in Pakistan and raise awareness regarding the same amongst Pakistani readers of the play. In order to do so, essentially qualitative in nature, this paper uses the parameters of textual analysis set by Catherine Belsey. Sylvia Walby's (1990) Theory of Patriarchy is used to probe the set research questions and achieve the set objectives. To achieve the objectives for this paper, the six structures defined and set by Walby: Paid Work, Household Production, Culture, Sexuality Violence, and the State are used to compare and contrast Hamlet and A Girl in the River.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Gavin Bolton (1992), "drama has a great deal to do with pedagogy because it is an art" (p. 39). Hamlet, along with other plays by Shakespeare, is part of the curriculum in English at colleges and universities at Bachelors, Masters, and MPhil levels. This provides the best opportunity for the teachers to teach Hamlet the way this paper explores and suggests regarding the subject at hand. Similarly, Pakistani literature is part of the same curriculum, and the documentary A Girl in the River could well be part of it too. Thus, it will provide an excellent opportunity to address the issues of subjugation and mistreatment of women and women-related honour. It is pertinent to mention that drama as a medium provides a useful medium to enable the audience and readers to question the subject at hand.

According to educational theatre scholar Anthony Jackson (2001),

Any good theater [Drama/performance/documentary] will of itself be educational – that is, when it initiates or extends a questioning process in its audience, when it makes us look afresh at the world. Its institutions and conventions and at our own place in that world, when it expands our notion of who we are, of the feelings and thoughts of which we are capable, and of our connection with lives of others.

Thus, it is inferred that drama/documentary has the potential to attract the audience and has an equally important effect of enabling them to question the content that is presented/represented. In this case, Hamlet, as well as A Girl in the River, has the potential to enable its audience and readers to question the problems related to the patriarchal system in Pakistan.

Patriarchy is the most widespread theory of the women's movement in the modern world. Although there are many forms of it, the main idea of it is that male domination or sexism is present in the modern world implicitly and in Pakistan explicitly. In the context of Pakistan, patriarchy influences different areas that include family, work, relationships, and culture. Its presence is synonymous with inequality and gender violence, that is, the subjugation and mistreatment of women. In Pakistan especially, the term "patriarchy" is used alternatively for women's oppression. As a result of this suppression and subjugation, women are treated as objects and commodities, with whom the so-called honour of the family is tied. This honour is tied to the complete subjugation and chastity of women. Ophelia wears virginal white in the madness scene of Hamlet, while the prince wears scholarly black. The virginal white of Ophelia is a symbol of chastity and that women must remain chaste and

submissive. Remaining chaste and loyal is respect and dignity. However, in this case, the respect and dignity are replaced with the so-called honour of the family, where men exploit them for their own benefits and desires. Ophelia must remain loyal to her father, Polonius, and her brother Laertes, but only to carry out their orders for their own vested interests. Similarly, Saba and women like her are forced to remain submissive and oppressive in *A Girl in the River* and Pakistan, respectively. The only difference between the two is that Ophelia is expected to be obedient and submissive, whereas Saba, and the women like her, are forced into this submission, which results in violence and honour killing.

Honour has various definitions and different narratives in society, politics, love, the family system, and patriotism, which require in-depth separate study.

According to Knudsen (2004),

Honour killing is an imprecise term for murder precipitated by the aggressor's loss of "honour" and can provisionally be defined as a "ritualised form of violence usually with male perpetrators and often, but not always, female victims".² This extra-judicial punishment is meted out by private actors according to customary law and there is usually no way to repeal the sentence. The offender is usually killed by close family members, most often a brother, father or husband, on their own accord. Honour killings form part of what has been termed "traditional justice" or "tribal justice", a contested form of private retribution that many find unwarranted and illegitimate (p, 1).

However, the focus of this paper is on the prevalent honour system that leads to honour-based violence and killings in Pakistan. According to the United Nations Progressive Alliance (UNPA) (2000), honour killings have taken over 5000 lives of women all around the world. In Pakistan, although the true figure is not known, over 1,000 victims are identified in the same report. Amnesty International published a report in 1999 that contained graphic details of the victims who were brutally murdered for a range of reasons, such as: marrying a man of their own choice, defying arranged and/or forced arranged marriages, seeking divorce, being raped, and fake honour killings. In addition, underage marriage also takes place in the country, where the decisions of the male members of the family are enforced on the young girls. The girl, whether of age or underage, is bound to obey the male members of their family. Just like Ophelia and Saba, women are expected and forced to obey the male members of their family. Thus, patriarchy sets its roots deeper into the practices of society, and it is the practice of so-called honour that paves the way for it.

The London-based Thomson Reuters Foundation ranked Pakistan as the 6th most dangerous country in the world for women (Shah, 2021). It is mainly due to the presence of strong roots of patriarchy and honour-based violence towards women. According to Shah (2021),

Pakistan ranks as the sixth most dangerous country in the world for women, with cases of sexual crimes and domestic violence recording a rapid rise. Activists blame society's patriarchal attitudes for the problem (para, 4).

In the patriarchal set, women are subjugated and mistreated whenever they tend to raise their voice for their rights. Hadi (2017) argues that Patriarchal values are embedded in Pakistani society which determines the subordinate position of women. Patriarchal control over women is exercised through institutionalized restrictive codes of behavior, gender segregation and the ideology which associates family honour to female virtue (p, 289).

In the similar line of argument, Saba, like most women, is a victim of bringing shame to the family by marrying a man of her own choice resulting in her attempted murder by her family members. She was bound to follow her parents' and brothers' wishes. Going against, brought her miseries and problems, which she bravely faced though.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In old school criticism, Shakespeare has been criticized as an anti-feminist. The oft quoted line 'Frailty, thy name is woman' (Act 1, Sc 2, line 146) from Hamlet is used as a basis for this criticism, where Shakespeare through Hamlet generalizes and attributes frailty to women based on the hasty marriage of the latter's mother. Hamlet displays arrogant contempt for his mother and her remarriage. He considers his mother's decision as the frailty of all women. Similarly, women in *A Girl in the River* are depicted as frail. Although Saba makes and takes bold decisions, for which she suffers a lot, she is considered frail for her decision-making by her family members. She is considered weak for not keeping the honour of her family by hastily marrying, much to the discontent of her family. Her actions are frowned upon by her family, which is similar to that of Gertrude's hasty marriage and Hamlet's subsequent reaction. Hamlet's disregard for women shows his misogynistic thoughts as he appears to be cursing his mother for marrying twice, "Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast | With the witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts, that have the power to seduce!—won to his shameful lust | The will of my most seeming virtuous queen" (Act 1 Scene 4 Line 41–46). This situation resonates with and reminds of Saba's sister's opinion, who tries to justify her family's action of shooting Saba, saying that "who can tolerate such a betrayer from a daughter who runs away and marries without their consent?" (12:27)

Similar to the reaction of Saba's family, Hamlet also believes it is his mother's proneness to sexual temptation that has led her to take this decision, thus questioning her purity of womanhood by accusing her of "honeying and making love/Over the nasty sty" (Act 3, Sc 4, lines 93–94) and even calling her "husband's brother's wife" (Act 3, Sc 4, line 15). Despite the fact that the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius is legitimate, Hamlet labels it as dirty and gross. Similarly, Saba's marriage is legitimate but it is considered illegitimate and gross by her family members because it was done without the consent of the latter. Hamlet gets violent in the same scene, and Gertrude fears that he might kill her. However, upon hearing movement behind the curtain in Gertrude's room where Polonius is hiding, Hamlet stabs him to death. In the case of Saba, she was directly shot at by her father and uncle and her body was thrown into a river where she miraculously survived. In the documentary, Saba mentions that "but I was just slightly able to tilt my head, which led to the shot missing its target... then they put me in a bag, and threw me in the river." So, I

would go right to the bottom and no one would ever find out what happened" (07:28 – 07:45). Violence takes place in both cases, with similar motives and anger.

In a similar line of argument, as Saba and Pakistani women in the patriarchal setup are expected to be obedient and submissive, Ophelia, as a good and obedient Elizabethan daughter, obeys the two most dominant men in her family – Polonius and Laertes – despite being in love with Hamlet. She agrees upon hearing an imposed decision to stay away from Hamlet; "I shall obey my lord" (Act 3; Scene 1). Before leaving for France, Laertes presses Hamlet to stay away from him and not to respond to his love either. While demanding to remain chaste, Laertes directs Ophelia, "Fear it, Ophelia; fear it, my dear sister; and keep you in the rear of your affection; out of the shot and danger of desire" (Act 1, Scene 3, lines 36–39). At the time of leaving, Laertes says goodbye to Ophelia but presses her again to remember her advice and to follow it: 'Farewell, Ophelia; and remember well what I have said to you' (Act, Scene, Line 91-92). Ophelia submissively and obediently replies, "'Tis in my memory locked— And you yourself shall keep the key to it" (Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 93-94). When Polonius asks Ophelia what Laertes has said to her, she replies that it concerns Hamlet, to which Polonius responds to stay away from Hamlet 'As it behoves my daughter and your honour.' (Act 1, Scene 3, Line 105). The mention of honour is not surprising, and the reference to the term can be seen in abundance in *A Girl in the River*. The neighbor of Saba claims that 'Honor and land are common disputes here [in Pakistan].' (23:15). Justifying his action, Saba's father claims that "She took away our honor" (14:25). It's the same honour that Polonius, Laertes, and Saba's father and uncle claim to maintain by subjugating their daughters.

At the same time, she is asked by her father to keep a close watch on Hamlet too, leaving her confused and perplexed. Absurdly, when Hamlet starts acting unusually strange, Ophelia's father wants her to keep a watch on him to observe furtively why he is acting peculiarly. To which Ophelia once again agrees, and she chooses to obey her father's orders over her love for Hamlet. Saba even uses the word "watchman" for herself to obey the wishes of her father as well as her brother.

Apparently, in *Hamlet*, we see that men not only want to dominate women's minds but their bodies too. Ophelia was not only dominated by her father and brother but also by Hamlet, whom she loved. Women were expected to obey their men, undoubtedly, regardless of their own welfare. In the mouse trap scene, where Hamlet stages a play to catch the guilty conscience of his uncle, he flirts around with Ophelia and says, "Lady, shall I lie in your lap?" (Act 3, Scene 2, Line 70), to which she, dutiful as ever, replies, "No, my lord" (Act 3, Scene 2, Line 71). Hamlet adds, "Do you think I meant country matters?" (Act 3, Scene 2, Line 74), to which she responds, "I think nothing, my lord" (Act 3, Scene 2, Line 75).

Similarly, Saba's family shot her because they thought that they had been dishonoured and that she had brought shame to the family by desecrating her body and chastity. "People respected us in the entire family... she brought us

shame" (12:42) are the words of Saba's sister. And it is because of this desecration of the body and chastity that her family shot Saba. Choosing for herself and not giving into subjugation becomes the cause of her becoming the victim of honour killing.

CONCLUSION

According to Saba's lawyer,

"Honor killing under the Pakistani law should be treated as a murder and the case should be prosecuted in the court of law as any murder case. But what happens is that in most cases the near relatives who are allowed under law can forgive the accused so for example if father kills his daughter, the rest of the family members forgive him. The killers in honor killing cases are allowed to be acquitted. And that is also one reason why honor killings are rising because people get to know that if they kill their daughters and sisters they may still go free. This is not just Saba's cause, its society cause."

Therefore, there is a dire need to address this issue of subjugation of women and honour killing. Different government bodies are working on the issue at hand. However, there is a need to address the same through academia. The Hamlet and A Girl in the River provide the best plat form to address the related issues. Such study provides the basis to address these issues within the limits of Pakistani culture and values, where respect is not mistaken for subjugation and domestic violence. It is pertinent to mention that this study focuses on the crimes that are committed against women in the name of honour and shame. By no means does it promote disobedience to the positive values of Pakistani society and culture.

It is, therefore, concluded that there are numerous parallels between Hamlet and A Girl in the River. Although Ophelia drowns in the river and Saba survives, there are a lot of similarities in terms of suffering and survival between the two. Based on these parallels, the paper concludes that both texts have the potential to address Pakistan's contemporary patriarchy and related issues. Both texts have the potential to highlight and raise the issues at hand and address them through the characters of Ophelia and Saba.

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