

## **The Perilous Voyage: Illustration of Pakistani Women in the Memoir of Mukhtar Mai**

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### **Abstract**

Pakistan is home to a constellation of communities based on regional, religious, or historical identities. The country has a patriarchal society in which social development has lagged considerably behind economic change, as revealed by such critical indicators as sanitation, access to health care and literacy, particularly among women. Women are the centres of attention and life. But ironically the same society also considers women as no more than secondary citizens, largely due to traditional norms prevailing in the whole society. The role and status of Pakistani women in all walks of life has been highly undermined.. Women's legal and social status in Pakistan has had a turbulent history. From honour killings to gang rapes, women have had to pay their lives and bodies for alleged crimes violating their family's or their tribe's so-called 'honour'. Mukhtar Mai, a Pakistani peasant woman, came to prominence in June 2002, after a gang-rape as an 'honour punishment'. Her memoir was had been published in 23 languages including English under the name *In the Name of Honour:A Memoir*. The book stands as a glaring example of the ingrained cultural and social bias against women's rights in Pakistan.

**KEYWORDS :** Androcentric, Religion, Power Politics, *Karo- Kari, Hudood*

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### Introduction

Since its birth in 1947 the Pakistani state has been repeatedly challenged by various groups on the basis of nationalism, regional separation, religious doctrine and political ideology. Pakistan has a patriarchal society in which social development has lagged considerably behind economic change, as revealed by such critical indicators as sanitation, access to health care and literacy, particularly among women. Women are the centers of attention and life. But ironically the same society also considers women as no more than secondary citizens, largely due to traditional norms prevailing in the whole society. The role and status of Pakistani women in all walks of life has been highly undermined. A large number of Pakistanis belong to the rural areas who work in the fields and in the industrial sector. It is a poor and virtually illiterate majority which leads a life of physical hardship involving long hours at tedious chores for which there is no compensation or recognition. Most of these women bear the double burden of house work and outside work. Moreover, being the last to eat, they eat less and suffer from anemia and malnutrition. In Pakistan the religion and society make a woman doubly marginalized. There is a wide disparity between the status of woman in Islam as determined by the doctrine of Holy *Quran* on the one hand and the actual conditions in Pakistan on the other. The cultural deviations are not uniform across the country. They vary by such factors as the socio-economic status of the family in which a woman is

born, the rural or urban setting, caste group, regional group and so on. Islam provides many more rights to women than are actually available to an average woman in Pakistan.

The judiciary includes the Supreme Court, provincial high courts, and other lesser courts exercising civil and criminal jurisdiction. There is also a Federal *Shariat* Court consisting of eight Muslim judges, including a chief justice appointed by the president. In addition to the formal criminal justice systems the *jirgas* or village councils are at work in rural areas. They resolve local disputes because the relatively poor peasants in the villages who cannot afford to pay a lawyer.

Two of the main causal factors of terrorism in Pakistan are sectarian or religious violence and the Pakistani state's active nurturing of terrorist proxies for perceived strategic ends. While Punjabis represent the majority of the population, Pakistan is home to a constellation of communities based on regional, religious, or historical identities. Sectarian and religious violence have been a recurrent feature of Pakistan's history since 1947, both in the form of violent conflicts between religious communities, and in the form of one-sided violence against religious minorities.

Mukhtar Mai, a Pakistani peasant woman who lived in Meerwala, a small village in southern Punjab, came to prominence in June 2002, after a gang-rape as an 'honour punishment' on the orders of a traditional village council. By custom, rural women are expected to commit suicide after such an event. Instead, she spoke up, and pursued the case, which was picked up by the international media, creating pressure on the Pakistani government and the police to address the rape. The case eventually went to trial, and her rapists were arrested, charged and convicted, until an appeals court overturned the convictions. The Supreme Court of Pakistan later acquitted all except one of the accused. Mukhtar Mai's memoir was first published in France. It had been published in 23 languages including English under the name *In the Name of Honour: A Memoir*. The book deals with the real life story of Mukhtar Mai. It stands as a glaring example of the ingrained cultural and social bias against women's rights in Pakistan.

#### Women, Tradition, and Society

Pakistan was created on the basis of the Two-Nation theory, which emphasizes Islamic teachings and values, giving the best and the most balanced code of life. But the pseudo-fundamentalists converted the teachings of *Islam* to read it in the best interests of men which made the society highly unjust towards women. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the country's founding father, tried to convince his followers through his speeches that it is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of houses as prisoners. But unfortunately, his words went in vain.

The status of women in the country varies considerably across classes and regions in consequence with the impact of tribal, feudal, and capitalist social formations on women's lives. Women's legal and social status in Pakistan has had a turbulent history. From honour killings to gang rapes, women have had to pay their lives and bodies for alleged crimes violating their family's or their tribe's so-called 'honour'. To make matters worse, successive governments in Pakistan have consistently turned a blind eye over harrowing atrocities against women. In *Muslim Women and Islamic Tradition*,

Mariam Allana points out that in Muslim countries a woman rarely has an identity of her own. Her status is dependent upon her androcentric context. “She is seen as a daughter, wife or mother of a male member of the society. All these positions revolve around the familial domain.” (43)

The Mukhtar Mai case is a glaring example of the judicial, cultural and social obstacles that women encounter in obtaining justice in Pakistan. MukhtaranBibi, as she was earlier called, lived, as a 28-year-old divorcee, under the protection of her parents and brothers in the village of Meerwala in Punjab. This woman’s relatively peaceful and uneventful life changed on a fine day of June 2002, when she was persuaded to follow her father, uncle and the local *Mullah* to a meeting of the village council. Her 12-year old brother, Shakur, was under police custody for having spoken to a woman of the higher class, the *Mastois*. It had been convinced that if Mukhtaran, the respectable old woman of her family, begged for forgiveness her brother would be released. What followed next made a drastic change in the life of this poor illiterate woman.

Instead of accepting an apology, the powerful *Mastois* decided to punish Mukhtaran’s family by gang raping her. In full view of the entire village she was dragged to a stable and was repeatedly raped by four men of the *Mastoiclan*- Abdul khaliq, GhulamFarid, Allah Dita, and Mohammed Faiz. Finally she was thrown out. Her father covered her torn clothes with his shawl and took her back to the village. This was only the beginning of a tale of unimaginable suffering and courage. At first she also contemplated of committing suicide. But later she changed her mind. Mukhtaran was not ready to yield to destiny. She decided to file a case against her rapists. Her life became an inspiration for all the women, not only in Pakistan, but around the globe who suffer from inhuman customs and laws.

In Pakistan, a woman has nothing solid to stand on and she may be given as a compensation for an offence or raped as a form of reprisal by their family’s enemies.

When she lives with her parents, she does what they want. Once she has joined her husband’s household, she follows his orders. When her children are grown, her sons take over, and she belongs to them in the same way. (MukhtarMai 78)

In *Islamic Women: The Modernist Approach* , Dr. AmanullahFahad tries to emphasize that Islam has never proscribed literacy to women. According to *Quran*, he says, “both Muslim men and women are required to pray, ‘Lord, increase me in my knowledge’. Acquisition of knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim man and woman. The prophet has specifically mentioned ‘Muslim woman’ so that men do not find any excuse for depriving her of education.” (9). But that’s not the case in Pakistan. Two things come out in Mukhtar’s story - illiteracy and violence against women. Half the battle against violence is lost due to the fact that several women in the back and beyond of villages are illiterate, and thus are incapable of fighting or filing cases for the injustice that they suffer from.

As Leena Khan, an activist and writer, has pointed out, “honour killings and crimes in the name of honour are prevalent in many rural parts of the country, such as

Sindh or Punjab, where the illiteracy and poverty rates run high. Mukhtar's case is no exception. Illiteracy was one of the greatest hurdles that Mukhtar had to face in her struggle to fight for justice. She speaks about her difficulty in being unlettered.

Like many illiterate women, I knew nothing about the law – and solittle about my rights that I didn't even know I had any....When I begin this journey into the legal system, a path from which there is no turning back, I'm hampered by my illiteracy and my status as a woman. (MM 27, 30)

In the Punjab province women belong to the men of their families. They are objects and men have the right to do what they want with the women. Submission is compulsory. Women are the ones exchanged as merchandise to help resolve conflicts among families. For example, as a solution to a conflict involving murder, little girls of eleven or eight will be given to the victim's family in marriage. That sort of solution was intended to reduce confrontations among castes or tribes by inter-mingling their bloodlines.

Mukhtar's memoir throws light on the fact that in the village a girl child doesn't get proper education from a school. Aside from prayer and the recitation of the quran that's the only education they get. It teaches them obedience, submission, fear, and abject respect for men. In a way it teaches them to forget themselves. Hence Mukhtar decided to start a school for girls with the money she got as compensation from the government. It was not easy. During the first days of her school, Mukhtar had to go from door to door to convince parents to send their daughters to school. Their doors were not slammed in her face, but the fathers tried to make her understand that girls are made for the house, and not for studies.

Mukhtar Mai's life story opens up a window through which the Pakistani culture can be seen. Mukhtar had learned at around age ten that it was forbidden to talk to boys and notes that she had never broken that taboo. She also tells how girls aren't allowed to play with boys even when they are very small, sarcastically commenting "a kid found playing marbles with his little girl cousin gets beaten by his mother" (MM 91). The memoir highlights problems with the system of arranged marriages as well. In arranged marriages everything happens somewhere else, among men. In Mukhtar's case, her uncles, brothers, and male cousins were gathered together to choose a day for the wedding, which would be convenient to the male members of the family. Here "the women have no right to speak up. Still less the fiancée." (MM101). That evening the head of the family comes home to announce the news to his wife, and that's how a girl learns that she will be married on a certain day.

*Karo-kari* is part of the cultural tradition in Pakistan and is a compound word literally meaning 'black male' (*Karo*) and 'black female' (*Kari*). They are the metaphoric terms for adulterer and adulteress. Once labelled as a *Kari*, male family members get the self-authorized justification to kill a woman and the co-accused *Karo* to restore family honour. Usually the victim is female, while the murderers are male. Mukhtar cites examples of honour killing in the country. The first incident is the murder of a young man in the name of honour. He decided to marry a woman against the wishes of both the families. As a result the girl was considered by her family as "ill-bred" and during a

family reunion her two brothers killed him to punish him for having stained the family honour. In another part of the country, a man belonging to the *Muhajir* cast, named Faheemuddin and a woman of the *Manzai* cast, Hajira got married. Hajira's father had opposed the match and the couple was arrested. However, they won the case at the Supreme Court because Hajira testified that she had not been raped and had married him willingly. But on the very day both of them were attacked and killed by a group of men including the young woman's father, uncle, and brother. Amin Muhammad Gadit, in "*Karo-Kari: A Form of Honour Killing in Pakistan*" writes about the gender bias in honour killings. In his opinion, these violence are strongly gender biased in that men who engage in similar behavior are typically subject to less severe punishments. Some individuals and communities in Pakistan have maintained traditional patriarchal interpretations of Islam, which valorize female chastity and male superiority.

Through her acquaintance with the activists, and journalists, Mukhtar comes to know about the sufferings of other women in the country. Her memoir studies the experiences of many downtrodden women. "Every hour in Pakistan, a woman is assaulted, beaten, burned with acid, or killed in the 'accidental' explosion of a cooking-gas canister. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has recorded 150 cases of rape during the last six months in Punjab alone" (MM 122). She notes the names of Dr. Shazia Khalid and Kauser, two rape survivors who represent the educated urbanite and the illiterate commoner respectively. Mukhtar says: "No matter what her social status, whether she's educated or illiterate, poor or well-off, any woman victimized by violence is also the victim of intimidation." (MM 131)

#### Politics of Power and Religion

The Amnesty International has reported many instances where members of the public have taken the law into their own hands and unlawfully killed people alleged to have blasphemed. Amnesty International believes that such barbarous crimes are encouraged by the fact that the law provides the mandatory death penalty for anyone found to have committed blasphemy. Many men in Pakistan believe themselves entitled to punish women who have transgressed social norms of behaviour and this leads to hundreds of killings of women perceived to have undermined male 'honour', every year. Islamic non-formal courts have also 'tried' and 'convicted' people.

The rape punishment was given to Mukhtar by the higher caste *Mastois*, the clan who were in control of the village. She was punished for the crime allegedly committed by her twelve year old brother, Shakur. Being a *Gujjar*, the low caste boy, he dared to talk to a woman among the *Mastois*! Mukhtar describes them as a miniature form of the local terrorist groups in Pakistan. They dominated the *Jirga*, the village court. The lack of legal rights for women results from the country's reliance on these traditional tribal systems of law and order. These customs often favour religious extremism and the government and the judiciary act as puppets in the hands of extremists. Mukhtar makes as scornful comment: "The more extreme the violence, the more driven they are to take part in it." (MM 67)

The *Hudood* ordinances, introduced by the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as part of Islamicizing the country, equated the laws pertaining to rape and adultery. This

has had devastating effects on women. In his article, “The criminal justice system in Pakistan”, Sohail Anwar writes:

In the Criminal Justice System, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups, the Police who investigate the crime, and the District Attorney who prosecute the offenders. However in Pakistan, we have a Police that terrorizes the population, protects VIPs, extorts money and misplaces exculpatory evidence. Then we have district attorneys who are paid squat. They prosecute on false evidence and have no protection when handling cases. Hence the people in Pakistan's criminal justice system are represented by pure crap.

Like the other women Mukhtar too views the official justice as reserved for the educated and the wealthy. No one ever told her that Pakistan had a constitution, laws, and rights written down in a book. The ‘nearest’ police station is some thirty miles away from her house and even they cannot stand up to the *Mastois*. The *Mastois* are capable of attacking and robbing anyone’s home with their guns. Mukhtar explains:

The police know all this . . . The *Mastois* have been here for generations, and there is nothing to be done about them. They have friends in high places, and absolute power is in their hands, from our village all the way up to the district capital. They are in control. (MM 20)

After the rape, visiting the police station had become her everyday activity. In the police station she had to sit on the floor, in a room without any furniture, in the company of strangers. There she spent the whole day without doing anything. In the evening the police themselves drove her back to the village. This procedure repeated for three days. Finally she was convinced that this type of ‘interrogation’ was a means to keep her away from the media. The policemen wanted to fabricate an entirely different story which would allow the *Mastois* to escape easily. In Mukhtar’s words, “Whether he’s a peasant or a soldier, a man rapes as he pleases whenever he wants. He knows that most of the time he’ll be spared, protected by a whole system – political, tribal, religious, or military.” (MM 131)

Finally, the High Court acquitted five of the accused and the remaining one was condemned to life imprisonment. Mukhtar felt like being raped all over again. She wanted justice, being fully aware of the fact that it would cost her life. She believes that if the justice of men doesn’t punish the guilty, God will take care of it sooner or later. But she would like that justice to be given to her officially. But it is very rare in a country like Pakistan. Mukhtar Mai’s story spread all over the country thanks to the newspaper articles. This made the government anxious and worried, especially because of its unusual publicity. The government of Pakistan became aware that the case of Mukhtaran Bibi had become an affair of the state. The authorities sent a woman minister to console ‘the victim of rape’. She had been instructed to give Mukhtar a cheque for half a million rupees. Mukhtar accepted the cheque in order to start a school for girls in the village.

Mukhtar was informed that as a ‘security precaution’, she was under a form of house arrest. Then her passport was taken away from her.

On June 11, I learn that for my safety, I have been forbidden to travel. I had been invited to Canada and the United States by Amnesty International, but when I go to Islamabad to settle some formalities, I learn that I'm on something called the 'exit control list,' and am not permitted to leave the country. (MM 157)

Mukhtar has had troubles from other political leaders also. They felt that she was displaying Pakistan's dirty laundry in public. In addition to that they were resentful about an uneducated peasant woman from a remote village being celebrated as a hero, getting more attention than they themselves have got. Mukhtar says:

During a debate in the Assembly, one senator – a woman – even declares that I have become 'a Western Woman' who should 'show more modesty and discretion' by not traveling outside the country and by waiting instead 'for the justice of God'. Certain politicians are only too happy to openly reproach the NGOs for appealing to international lobbies. In short, it's in my 'interest', as they put it, not to spread my story around the world, and to take care of everything here at home. Claiming that I do not respect the laws of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, certain extremists would like to force me to be quiet. (MM 157-158)

In 2005, Mukhtar was planning to speak at the UN. But the speech had been cancelled on orders of the Pakistani government. In Pakistan as well, the government had applied constant pressure on her. Her mail was seized, and her phone calls were bugged. Newspapers close to the government were constantly publishing derogatory articles about her.

Social power is the basic element in politics, economics, and all other social relationships. It is possessed by all individuals and social groups and it arises out of their connections to each other. We live in a world where power resides in the hands of a wealthy minority. These imbalances are at the root of most social problems and conflicts. Correcting power imbalances will go a long way towards solving many problems at once in Pakistan.

#### Conclusion

Mukhtar Mai's *In the Name of Honour: A Memoir* voices the helplessness of hundreds of have-nots in Pakistan. Her memoir is an account of the manipulation by a feudal structure that used her gender to settle scores: a gang rape to assert clan supremacy, and the rape of a woman to vindicate the alleged violation of another's modesty. Mukhtar Mai seems to be full of insights about the way the oppressive system around her works. Her strategy of educating men first so that they may rebel against the feudal system that oppresses women, shows her deep understanding of the politics of power that is prevalent in Pakistani society. It is undoubtedly an individual's story and it is important not to stereotype or orientalise either its positives or negatives.

The patriarchal society, in the name of religion, treats women as sub human beings. Mukhtar Mai is doubly marginalized by the power structures which are

governed by the 'other' section of the society, on the basis of gender as well as wealth. She has to go beyond the boundaries of both religion and society because she is a 'woman' born in a 'poor' peasant Gujar family. As Bertolt Brecht writes:

The poor need courage. They're lost, that's why. That they even get up in the morning is something – in their plight. Even their bringing children into the world shows they have courage, for they have no prospects.”  
(Mother Courage and her Children 51)

But mere courage is not enough to fight against the combined force of two or more power structures. There is nothing new in it that the politically protected male world doesn't allow the women to enjoy their legitimate rights. The orthodox mindset which is prevalent in the country dangerously affects the keeping up of human rights. Feminists are not at all respected. People take them for dangerous revolutionaries and trouble makers in a man's world. In such conditions, the only way to obtain justice is to demand it vociferously.

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