

A QUESTION OF IZZAT: HONOR, SHAME AND OWNERSHIP AMONG SUNNI MUSLIMS IN SOUTH ASIA AND THE BRITISH DIASPORA

Lila Ramos Shahani
University of Oxford
lrshahani@dswd.gov.ph

Abstract

This paper is part of a larger project that looks at Asian writers in the English-speaking world. It focuses on literature representing British-Muslim identities in relation to post-9/11 and post-7/7 debates on national identity, cultural and religious expression, and the future of multiculturalism in Britain. While the postcolonial paradigm offers a rich site for examining the long-term consequences of colonialism in relation to first- and second-generation writers, the complex politics of location in recent British-South Asian fiction points to the emergence of a new set of positionalities. I argue that much contemporary minority writing has come to reflect a significantly altered context in which secularism, cosmopolitanism and hybridization are being challenged by a politics of faith and insurgency—a politics that is at once defined and contested within specific communities and along transnational lines. At the fulcrum of these political debates spurred by minority writing are questions of honor and shame articulated on the physical location and moral evaluation of women in diasporic communities.

Keywords

women's oppression, multiculturalism, translation, ghettoization, religion, ethnicity

About the Author

Assistant Secretary Lila Ramos Shahani has had variety of work experiences at home and abroad. She began as a Deputy Director of the *Museo ng Kalinangang Pilipino* (Museum of Philippine Humanities) at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) and taught Literature and Art Studies at the University of the Philippines (UP). In New York, she was an editor for Oxford University Press (OUP-NY), a research director for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and a policy adviser for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

More recently, she was Assistant Secretary at the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) and adjunct faculty at the Asian Institute of Management (AIM). She is now head

of communications of the Human Development and Poverty Reduction Cabinet Cluster (HDPGCC), which covers twenty-six government agencies dealing with poverty and development. She did her undergraduate work at Brown University, received a Masters Degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and is now a doctoral candidate at Oxford University.

THIS PAPER GROWS OUT OF MY DISSERTATION RESEARCH, which looks at Asian writers in the English-speaking world. What follows is based on my first chapter, which focuses on literature representing British-Muslim identities in relation to post-9/11 and post-7/7 debates on national identity, cultural and religious expression, and the future of multiculturalism in Britain. While the postcolonial paradigm offers a rich site for examining the long-term consequences of colonialism in relation to first- and second-generation writers, the complex politics of location in recent British-South Asian fiction points to the emergence of a new set of positionalities. Indeed, much contemporary minority writing has come to reflect a significantly altered context in which secularism, cosmopolitanism and hybridization are being challenged by a politics of faith and insurgency—a politics that is at once defined and contested within specific communities and along transnational lines.

As primary texts, I use Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), which depict contemporary Muslim communities in Britain and, as such, offer interesting entry points into this broader theoretical and political context. Ali's novel portrays a Bangladeshi (predominantly Sylheti) community in London's East End, while Aslam focuses on a Pakistani (Punjabi) community in north England. As both texts appear at a highly fraught moment for Muslims and South Asians both in the UK and all over the world, the cultural insularity in both novels is particularly striking: indeed, why do the authors appear to look no further than these very communities in order to understand many of the economic and socio-cultural struggles their characters continuously grapple with? In other words, why does there appear, in both cases, to be so little explicit engagement with wider dominant systems—the socio-legal policies of the British welfare state and the forms of cultural segregation these policies have since engendered—that have been responsible for these very forms of ghettoization in the first place? It is noteworthy that both authors remain preoccupied with endogenous exchanges *within* each community and, as such, create ethnographies that have little interaction with the wider *polis* around them. In situating most of the dramatic tension within the ghetto itself—their narrative gazes turning almost entirely inwards—both authors elide much of the racial tension that, historically, these types of communities have had to contend with.

These elisions are not insignificant, in view of the deeply problematic status of minority communities within the British nation-state. Both texts in fact offer few actual references to Britain itself, and communities are depicted as if they were literally reconstructed from their countries and communities of origin, and were only inadvertently transplanted in Britain (Homi Bhabha's [1990] term for this was "glocalization [225]). In addition to rethinking multiculturalism, these debates have called into question traditional definitions of "Britishness," "Black Britishness" and "English ethnicities." Indeed, it can be argued that multiculturalism has produced a certain kind of writing in Britain, with minority writers writing in English, offering richly textured (if often problematic) vignettes of their respective communities

to the cultural mainstream. Many of the most prestigious literary prizes in the country have been consistently won by minority writers (Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith and Kiran Desai, among others) in recent years. But if writers like Rushdie, Kureishi and Smith have created hybrid, cosmopolitan and highly syncretic minority worlds, on the one hand, authors like Ali and Aslam have depicted cultural spaces that remain unusually insular, on the other. Indeed, in attempting to “speak” for the communities they hail from, the latter belong to another emerging subgenre in the contemporary British scene, which we can think of as minority writing” (Deleuze and Guattari 16). Minority writing entails the literary practice of using a major language, in this case English, to write from and about communities whose mother tongues are different. Deleuze and Guattari use the example of Kafka, who wrote in German, only to the extent that he was able to set aside his native Czech. Minority writing thus involves an act of translation, moving from one’s own language to that of the dominant Other.

Apart from its insular qualities, this subgenre is also notable for the ways in which it actively engages with the issue of female representation. These subaltern perspectives—typically rendered invisible by religious, socio-cultural and class hierarchies—are given a rare voice, allowing us to examine the choices characters have made within the twin contexts of their respective minority cultures, on the one hand, and British multicultural policies, on the other. In what follows, I want to examine what these novels by Ali and Aslam (as my primary ethnographic points of reference) nonetheless leave out: the larger socio-cultural contexts from which they spring, namely the complex and shifting meanings of ‘honor’ and ‘shame.’ In this essay, I look at the two Sunni communities in which the novels are situated, rather than at the novels themselves. I will defer a longer and more involved reading of the novels for another occasion. It is my contention that a close reading of the novels will require setting forth their social context, which ultimately lends to the conditions of their legibility. For the moment, I want to defer a close reading of these texts for the sake of examining the gendered social dynamics within which they unfold and which, arguably, lend to the extra-textual conditions of their legibility. Hence, I will ask instead a set of preliminary questions regarding female agency in the communities evoked by the novels. In particular, I examine the conditions of possibility that allow for its emergence in and through the articulation of ideas pertaining to honor and shame, in the context of the ghettoization produced by immigration and the British welfare state itself.

I ask how the intertwined notions of honor and shame are understood and transformed as they travel from their South Asian origins and are translated in the context of Britain’s diasporic Muslim communities. I argue that such translations—rather than rupture received ideas about honor and shame—actually become modulated and occasionally intensified as they are redeployed among diasporic communities in Britain.

The Historical Sweep: From Empire to Diaspora and Translation

It is perhaps necessary before we proceed to set the historical context for the formation of South Asian diasporic communities in Britain. In the wake of empire and the continued recruitment of workers from formerly colonized territories in the post-war context, the population of the United Kingdom (UK) became increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse. By the late 1990s, British multiculturalism had sought to come to terms with this diversity. While couched in the best intentions, it still drew from imperial practices of defining populations in sectarian—rather than ethnic—terms, stressing religious identity over race and ethnicity. This imperial mode of recognizing post-imperial populations has served as an important context for translating South Asian notions of honor and shame. For rather than opening up the honor/shame complex to secular transformation, British multiculturalism (and the political, economic and racial context of its implementation in a rapidly de-industrializing Britain) had, in fact, the effect of re-provincializing these concepts. Amidst the global flows of populations, vernacular categories for reckoning gender and sexual differences took on renewed importance for South Asian Muslims. Such vernacular concepts became ways of mediating their political, economic and cultural marginalization. Vernacular notions of honor/shame furnish the means for localizing and translating gendered notions of personhood and dignity in a radically different British context. They thus mitigate the sense of marginalization experienced by the diasporic community.

However, the reinscription of such notions also had an adverse effect on one of the most significant members of the diaspora: women. We see this in the way that the patriarchal and misogynistic effects of honor and shame have been carried over and redeployed, both in Sunni and Shi'a communities.

Thus, while the continued investment in vernacular concepts of honor and shame might seem understandable in the face of the more racist aspects of the British multicultural state, it may have come at a steep cost, with the sharpening of gender hierarchies and the hardening of women's oppression. Men have been authorized to violently constrain the movements of women, drastically limit their public role and, in extreme cases, murder them with impunity in the guise of honor killings. Understanding the translated notions of honor and shame across different British Muslim communities thus allows us to see how diasporic communities constitute themselves as moral spaces precisely in and through the relentless sacrifice of women's bodies. These bodies are invariably imagined as resources of men's honor and volatile repositories of shame, making them subject to social control and sacrificial extermination. Women's bodies have thus been repeatedly seized, invested with, and converted into, valuable possessions and dangerous beings—into a promise of paradise, conveying, at the same time, a sense of deepest menace.

Indeed, the honor/shame complex in traditional Muslim society has a wide range of semiotic markers, highlighting social and institutional processes that are often deeply contradictory. Cultural and inter-generational tensions have been prevalent in Muslim enclaves in Britain and throughout Europe for some time, signaling the essentially conservative nature of British multicultural discourse, on the one hand, and the various strategies of subversion deployed by younger generations, on the other. To what degree is this inter-generational negotiation between gender and culture, between the transnational and the “glocal,” transplanted and translated into the new, altered space of the British ghetto?

British India was partitioned in 1947, with the creation of the independent states of India and Pakistan. Prior to the creation of Pakistan, modern-day Bangladesh had been a part of ancient, medieval and colonial India. As a nation state, Bangladesh only became “constituted” as late as 1971, when it violently seceded from Pakistan. In the meantime, Pakistan had become increasingly conservative and militarized, culminating in the establishment of strict Islamic law (*Nizam-e-Mustafa*) in 1979—further exacerbating religious tensions between the two communities on matters of Koranic adjudication.

In the metropolis, an inadvertent consequence of Tony Blair’s Britain, ethnic groups were not organized in the British census and in the budget of the multicultural state according to their ethnicities, but according to their respective religions: Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs. This meant that glaring differences between Somalis and Pakistanis, for instance, became instantly elided. More importantly, it gave visas and budgets to those who were self-avowedly religious rather than to those who were secular or moderate in their self-expression, unwittingly leading to a deepening of religious fundamentalism in Britain.

Today, there are under 3 million Muslims in the UK (Pew Research Center): around 87-90% of whom are Sunni and 10-13% of whom are Shi’a. This paper will examine two Sunni groups: one Bangladeshi and one Pakistani.

Bangladeshis in London’s East End

Let me begin with the Bangladeshis in London’s East End. In this community, the notion of *izzat*, which is analogous to honor and prevalent throughout much of South Asia, is central. Produced and maintained by local and extended family kinship systems in Bangladeshi society, *izzat* is also tied to *samaj* as a form of ideal social organization, which implies a kind of constructed or ‘imagined community.’ The idea of *samaj* in South Asia is rooted in the notion of ‘going together,’ and continues to regulate social relationships and codes of appropriate behavior in friendships, marriages and family life, both at home and in the public sphere. In London’s East End, the leadership in British Bangladeshi communities reproduces social hierarchies based on *izzat*. Honor is thus seen through the prism of kin and community. A primary consideration in the community is, therefore, “what people

will say” In this way, we can think of *izzat* and other similar terms for honor as being primarily discursive.

Another complex concept is *shorom*, which has dual meanings: shame and punishment of guilty behavior, on the one hand, and modesty and shyness, on the other. Theoretically, codes of honor and shame refer to both women and men, *but honor is ultimately seen as being men’s responsibility, while shame is viewed as being women’s “burden.”* Honor is thus actively achieved, while shame is often passively defended, leading to an entirely different set of expectations for men and women. Men are expected to protect women’s honor, while women are expected to preserve it. In preserving their own shame, women can retain what Abu-Lughod refers to as the “honor of the weak” (*hasham*).

Pakistanis in North England

If British Bengalis have transplanted the honor/shame complex to Britain, how do Pakistani Sunnis in Britain understand and apply the term *izzat* for “honor?” Among the more conservative Pakistani enclaves of West Yorkshire in Britain (where much of the planning for the July 7, 2005 London “terror” bombings took place) the word “honor” has taken on even more pronounced misogynistic moorings. Here, the understanding of *izzat* has, in critical ways, been shaped by a series of draconian edicts issued by Pakistan’s Zia regime in 1979. One ordinance required that any woman claiming rape had to produce four pious male witnesses, a threshold of evidence so high that women often received the lash, while men remained unpunished. Another allowed the victim of a crime, or the victim’s heirs, to inflict a punishment on a perpetrator that was equal to the crime or, alternately, to commute punishment into a cash payment. The practical effect of this was therefore to “privatize” crime, with women invariably becoming unwilling pawns in cross-family disputes involving honor. For example, in a notorious case from 2003, a Pakistani woman was sentenced to be gang-raped in order to compensate for her brother’s alleged adultery. Afterwards, she was paraded naked in front of hundreds of villagers. Her rape was described to be a *vani* (“women barter”) case.

Other writers have pointed out that, in Northern Pakistan, *izzat* and *ghairat* convey a complex range of significations: honor, jealousy, courage, modesty and shame—all of which apply to both men and women. It should be noted that the opposite of *ghairat* is to be without merit. The relationship between *ghairat* and *izzat* is therefore about reputation, respect and merit. Protecting the chastity of women and defending familial honor in feuding relations thus imbues a man with *izzat*: political influence, power and authority.

Violence and Honor/Shame in Pakistan and its Diaspora

The honor/shame model, which focuses primarily on female sexual transgression, is oppressive in several fundamental ways. While it is meant to uphold men's honor in the face of British racism and global capitalist displacement, it is also generative of gender hierarchy underwritten by sexual violence. In the context of the Punjabi diaspora, the family's honor is predicated on the permanent possibility of exercising violence against women. Women's bodies become the focus of control within an extended family that includes parents-in-law, sisters-in-law and many others. For women are at once the focal point for securing familial reputation just as they constantly threaten loss of face. Their sexual volatility comes across as a kind of violence to family members who feel their "honor" on the verge of constantly being compromised and attacked. This doubleness in terms of women's capacity to support and subvert familial honor is vital to the parental generation when they consider the marriage options open to their sons and daughters.

In Bangladesh and among its diaspora, violence against women generally takes place in the form of acid attacks that seek to disfigure them, making them less eligible for marriage. Among those of Pakistani descent, on the other hand, violence against women emerges as a function of the striking relationship of *izzat* in Punjabi to the notion of *ownership*. Indeed, *honor tied to ownership* can take on a far more murderous inflection in the horrific practice of honor killings, for example. It is likely that the phenomenon harks back to the pre-Islamic Jahiliyah era (the "Time of Ignorance before Muhammed")—a time when men were encouraged to bury their daughters alive in order to avoid the possibility of dishonoring the family. While prevalent throughout South and Southwest Asia, Amnesty International observed in 2004 and 2010 that honor killings were most widespread in Pakistan, where the concept of woman as object/commodity was deeply rooted in its tribal culture. Like livestock, women have a vulvar or bride-price. Among Punjabis, then, women are seen as embodying the honor of men, to whom they belong. As the sole protector of the female, the man must not lose his *ghairat* (honor): otherwise, his *izzat*, standing in society, becomes diminished. A woman engaging in *zina* (sexual relations) is branded as *kari*, which means black. The only way to cleanse a man's honor is to literally kill in the name of honor: *ghairatmand*. Thus, a man who fails to do so is *beghairat*: dishonorable or socially impotent. The family of the deceased woman is also expressly forbidden to mourn her. In comparison, a man who has engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage is branded *karo*, which also means black. However, unlike the female *kari*, he gains social standing because he has managed to captivate her.

Geo-political Context

In conclusion, I want briefly to set South Asian Muslim diasporic communities in a geo-political context. It is important to note the differences between the more benign kind of Sunni Islam practiced in Bangladesh, versus the more misogynistic and Islamicist mandates in Pakistan. Bangladesh owes a deep cultural and intellectual debt to Dravidian India, where strong female figures (Kali, Durga) hold great sway in its Hindu pantheon. Moreover, the profound intellectual impact of the Bengal Renaissance in India—and its reformist views on women—has been considerable throughout the Bengali diaspora. In contrast, Pakistan is geographically and culturally closer to Iran, which is primarily Shi'a. Far more conservative in matters of Koranic adjudication, Shi'a Islam tends to favor a clerical rather than political elite. Not surprisingly, among the more conservative Sunni *imams* of Pakistan, there has been an unwillingness to engage with the West (and its humanist, feminist traditions). Finally, there is Pakistan's proximity to Saudi Arabia, where the most conservative forms of Sunni Islam are practiced and which have links to the Taliban in Afghanistan. Consequently, women are disproportionately made to bear the burdens of Islamic edicts. For example, over 15,000 rape victims were jailed because they could not provide the requisite number of male witnesses to their victimization during the early years of ul-Haq's regime alone.

The regional and historical contrasts between these two Sunni groups provide us with the geo-political context with which to understand the complex constellation of meanings surrounding honor and shame *once it is translated into the British Muslim diaspora*. Indeed, *izzat* is ultimately less the product of a monolithic religion than an anthropological and historico-cultural construction. Like all such constructions, the complex of honor and shame is contingent upon changing conditions. While it is harnessed as a cultural resource that underpins highly gendered social structures and power relations premised on the scapegoating of women, there is now evidence that these vernacular notions are also liable to transformation, and so to further translation. Already, most migrant population growth in Britain has been the result of higher-than-White birth rates rather than increasing migrant arrivals. Given limited residential space, Muslim ghettos (still highly endogenous) are becoming increasingly diverse, and laws have recently been passed against forced marriage, which certainly play a major role in curtailing honor killings. Thus, there is some potential that the South Asian diaspora itself could change its cultural practices without necessarily having to change its religious beliefs. Regrettably, this remains less true of its sisters in South Asia—those in Pakistan in particular—where the pressures of syncretic accommodation in a multi-ethnic state like Britain exist far less, and the cultural hegemony of the state continues to hold sway.

A keener understanding of these wider socio-cultural and historical conditions might enable us to re-engage with the type of minority writing with which I began. The marginal (while arguably central) position of women that emerges from these

ethnographically rich accounts of British South Asian life becomes understandable once we take into consideration the shifting meanings of honor and shame. The specificity of these meanings are produced, as I have argued, through a series of highly contingent historical and political processes: the demise of the British empire, the flow of South Asian immigration, British multiculturalism and the more recent post-9/11 turn to religious fundamentalism. In delineating such contexts, we might begin to open up the insularity of minority texts like those of Ali and Aslam. In so doing, we can begin to render more nuanced readings of both these literary texts and the cultural moorings that inform them.

Works Cited

- Aase, Tor. "The Prototypical Blood Feud." *Tournaments of Power: Honor and Revenge in the Contemporary World*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2002. Print.
- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000. Print.
- Amnesty International. "Pakistan—Amnesty International Report 2010." *Amnesty International*. n.p., 2010. Web. 30 Aug. 2012.
- Bhabha, Homi K., ed. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Bolognani, Marta. *Crime and Muslim Britain: Culture and the Politics of Criminology among British Pakistanis*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009. Print.
- Dale, Angela et al. "The Labour Market Prospects for Pakistani and Bangladeshi Women." *Working Papers: Future of Work Series* 11 (2000): 1-42. *ESRC Future of Work Programme*. Web. 2 Sept. 2012.
- Deleuze, Gilles. and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Foreword Réda Bensmaïa. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. Print.
- Eade, J. and Garbin D. "Changing Narratives of Violence, Struggle and Resistance: Bangladeshi and the Competition for Resources in the Global City." *Oxford Development Studies* 30.2 (2002): 137-149. Print.
- . "Competing Visions of Identity and Space: Bangladeshi Muslims in Britain." *Contemporary South Asia* 14.2 (2006): 181-193. Print.
- Kabeer, Naila. *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*. London: Verso, 2000. Print.
- Massey, Doreen B. *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity, 1994. Print.
- Pew Research Center. "Religion and Public Life Project." *Pew Research*, 2011. Web. 30 July 2012.
- Shaw, Alison. "Cultural Preference and Immigration: Consanguineous Marriage Among British Pakistanis." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7.2 (2001): 315-334. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (Toward a History of the Vanishing Present)*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.
- Werbner, Pnina. "Veiled Interventions in Pure Space: Honour, Shame and Embodied Struggles among Muslims in Britain and France." *Theory, Culture and Society* 24.2 (2007): 161-186. Print.
- UK National Statistics. *UK National Statistics Publication Hub*. n.p., n.d. Web. 3 Aug. 2012.