

Forgiveness as Desire to Unleash the Myth of Honor Killing in *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* by Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy

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Abstract

The current study investigates forgiveness as desire to unleash the myth of honor killing through the documentary A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness by Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy. Moreover, it highlights Lacanian concept of desire reflected through the decisions of the main characters of the documentary. Additionally, it discusses the construction and deconstruction of the myth of honor killing through the insights of Roland Barthes. It further traces that forgiveness is not true in the documentary by discussing Derrida's concept of forgiveness. Chinoy won many national and international awards including Oscar. She discusses the sensitive issue of honor killing in the selected Oscar award winning documentary. The research focuses the phenomenon that honor killing cannot be resolved without eliminating forgiveness. It also brings into light that social pressures are contributory factors in increasing honor killing which make people puppet. In addition, it claims that honor killing cannot be associated with Islam and Pakistan as it has pre-Islamic history.

Key Words: *Honor Killing, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, Lacan, Objet a, Roland Barthes, Myth*

Background of the Study

The study investigates forgiveness as desire to unleash the myth of honor killing through Chinoy's documentary. The issue of honor

killing is highlighted in the documentary which is a heinous activity performed mostly by the male members of the family. Moreover, the miserable element of the phenomena is that females are being killed by father, husband, brother and son who have close relation with the victims. It is a worldwide phenomenon which is being practiced in many countries of the world like Turkey, Algeria, UK, Brazil, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Bangladesh, India, Yemen, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, Germany, and U.S.A. (Vitoshka, 2010; Zia, 2010; Bibi, 2018).

In this context, the facts and figures can be seen increasing alarmingly in Pakistan that required serious steps to be taken in the country. In 2004, 1000 women were the victims who were killed in the name of honor killing (Knudsen, 2004; Zia, 2010). The ratio increased gradually and HRCPR “shows that approximately 2000 women were killed in the name of honor in the years of 2005-08 and in 2009 it increased more than 647 in a year” (HRCPR report, 2008, p. 1). Only in KPK, in 2017, it “has reached to 94” (Bibi, 2018, p. 170). Almost all the provinces of Pakistan are affected by this brutality with several names i. e. “Taurtoora, in NWFP, Karakari Siya Kari, in Sindh and Kala Kali in Southern Punjab” (Warraich, 2005, p. 1; Zia, 2010, p. 12; Bibi, 2018, p. 172). At the same time, UNPF claims that “5000 women are killed by the name of honor in each year throughout the world” (Zia, 2010, p. 2).

Simultaneously, there are several causes behind the phenomenon of honor killing. One of the most prominent is the chastity of women that cannot be tolerated by the family. The act brings shame and humiliation for the family hence they are forced to commit that crime. Additionally, the other causes of honor killing may be mentioned as illicit relations, extramarital sex, choosing her life partner with her own will, premarital sexual relations, dating with boyfriends, having relation with another ethnic, religious group or caste, customs, culture, settling of debts, family enmity, poverty, provoking by community, issues related to ownership of property, divorce, role of *vaderas*, *jirgas* and *panchayats*, *watta satta* etc. (Knudsen, 2004; Zia, 2010; Warraich, 2005; Smartt, 2006; Bibi, 2018; Lari, 2011).

In addition, the females are killed by the hands of their close family members because they cannot bear the humiliation while living in a society. Primarily, the close relatives are father, uncle, son and the husbands of women. They have the only option to kill women to clean their reputation and they considered it an honor for them (Smartt, 2006; ACHR, 2004; Zia, 2010; Bibi, 2018).

Another contributory factor is the loop holes in legislation. The person who commits that act is easily forgiven by the other member of the family. The laws of Qisas and Diyat are misused in the hands of murderers. In this way, they come out of prison within a short span of time and gain more honor in their social set up (ACHR, 2004; Zia, 2010). In this context it is argued that “a son could forgive his father for murdering his mother, a mother could forgive her husband for killing their daughter, a father could forgive his brother and so on, under the ordinance” (Hussain, 2006, p. 232; Zia, 2010, p. 31). Simultaneously, an encouraging news is that new legislations are a ray hope to reduce this act which “has increased the length of imprisonment specifically life imprisonment which according to the criminal law of Pakistan extend to the length of 25 years which is also prescribe as a mandatory punishment of life imprisonment, under section 311” (Bibi, 2018, p. 173).

Broadly speaking, the honor killing cannot be associated with Islam as it is a pre-Islamic phenomenon. Before Islam, people used to kill their baby-girls only to save their so-called honor. It is mentioned in Qura'an in Sura Al-Nahl (16:58-59) which also cited in Zia (2010) that “when news is brought to one of them, of [the birth of] a female [child], his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on [sufferance] and contempt, or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil choice they decide on” (p. 37). In this context, it can be asserted that the phenomenon of honor killing has no historical or religious bonding with Islam.

The selected Oscar winning documentary *narrates the story of a young girl Saba, who marries a boy with her own will survives after being shot in the head by her uncle and father. They throw her in the river*

after putting her in a bag. She luckily survives and manages to reach hospital. The story is that Saba's "father and uncle took her several hours after she married against her family's wishes; while they were initially supportive, Saba's uncle stepped in and demanded she marry his brother-in-law. Before they bundled her into the car and drove her to the river, both men swore on the Koran that they wouldn't hurt her"(Westcott, 2016, p. 1). In prison her father says that "Whatever we did, we were obliged to do it and she took away our honor", he added(Westcott, 2016, p. 1) but the documentary ends in forgiveness by Saba to both her father and uncle when the society intervenes into the matter.

The history of Chinoy is that she "was born on November 12, 1978 in Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan. She is a producer, journalist and director, known for Saving Face (2012), A Journey of a Thousand Miles: Peacekeepers (2015), A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)"(Chinoy-Biography, n.d., p. 1). She considers 'anger' a productive emotion which motivates her towards new writings and goals. Similarly, she wishes to provoke the same anger in audience to react the false notions of the society. She said that "anger is necessary for people to go beyond not liking what they see". She further added that "I need enough people who watch my stuff to be moved, and to be angry, and to do something about it"(Okeweo, 2018, p. 1).

Moreover, Chinoy believes in hitting hard the issue to resolve it. She asserts that "if a door hasn't opened for you, it's because you haven't kicked it hard enough' -- that is how I have lived my life" (TED, 2019, p. 1). She is very much aware of the power of camera and story-telling that can change the world view. She is active for the rights of oppressed women in the world. She "believes in the power of storytelling, and eliciting compassion and empathy by connecting audiences with people who have the courage to tell their stories. I traveled around the world shining a light on marginalized communities, refugees, women whose resilience in the face of adversity has inspired me to amplify their story"(TED, 2019, p. 1), she added.

Research Questions

- a. How does the forgiveness become desire in the selected documentary?
- b. Why the desire is unattainable in the decisions of characters in the selected documentary?
- c. How the myth of honor killing is unleashed in the selected documentary?

Construction and Deconstruction of Myth

Myth are generally taken as something eternal, ever-lasting and can never be challenged. But Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* does not take myths as the meanings associated with them. He considers it the construction of language where they are described as:

Of course, it is not *any* type: language needs special conditions in order to become myth: we shall see them in a minute. But what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form. (Barthes, 1991, p. 107)

It is argued that these significations can't be called myths because these are constructed. He further points out that "since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones" (Barthes, 1991).

So, myths are the constructions of events and the associations of meanings with them through language in a particular discourse. Hence, they are not natural as he further elaborates that "for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things" (Barthes, 1991, p. 108). It is not only confined to written and oral speech but to other modes of communications as well. He also mentions the other modes that "consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a

support to mythical speech”(Barthes, 1991, p. 108). So is the case of Chinoy’s documentary. She highlights the constructed myths and then strive to deconstruct them. The selected documentary is the example of such fruitful effort.

Chinoy’s documentary is not something like fiction or drama but it is based on true events and incidents of life. There are many other cases of honor killings in this country but she has chosen the story of Saba because she is the true spokesperson who stands in front of the brutal myth. Firstly, Chinoy highlights the constructed myth of honor killing then she also provides the probable solution to fix it. For example, Saba’s Uncle plays a trick to arrange the marriage of Saba with his brother-in-law instead of her fiancé Qaiser. He provides an argument that “they were inferior economically”(Chinoy, 2015). Saba runs away and succeeds in managing the marriage with her fiancé Qaiser against the will of her family. After this marriage, the story of honor killing starts when “Her father and uncle got her back with the promise by putting their hand on Qura’an that they will not harm her in any case. By coming back, they shot her at head and threw her in the river after putting her packed in a bag”(Chinoy, 2015).

The construction is so powerful that everyone is the part of it. Saba’s sister Aqsa narrates her feelings and emotions and says that “who could tolerate such betrayal from a daughter who ran away? People taunt us who feared before”(Chinoy, 2015). Maqsooda, Saba’s mother is of the view that “Saba left no respect for me”(Chinoy, 2015). Later, Saba’s Uncle says that “everything is about respect. Whatever he did was absolutely right”(Chinoy, 2015). Everyone is blaming Saba but they have forgot that they had attempted murder. They have also forgot that they themselves arranged her engagement with Qaiser and afterwards they rejected only because they were inferior to them.

In this context, Saba survives and becomes the embodiment of counter power and challenges the myth of honor killing. She is determined to fight the case against her own father and Uncle. She says that “even if someone powerful asks me, I will not forgive them”(Chinoy, 2015). She discords the begging of her uncle for forgiveness. Although, she is against their forgiveness but still she compromises on the emotional

pressure of the society. She says that “sometimes, we have to listen the advice of these men. Qaiser is against the settlement. But his elder brother handles everything so we will have to follow his lead and has the ultimate decision”(Chinoy, 2015). The words of Qaiser are the exact example of such constructions of myth that “so if we ignore them, why would they ever cooperate with us?”(Chinoy, 2015).

Chinoy holds the responsibility to deconstruct the myth of honor killing and presents Saba’s case in front of the world in the shape of documentary. The prime minister of that time watched the video and agreed to make necessary amendments in the law and they did. Chinoy’s efforts got recognized and the myth of forgiveness in the case of honor killing is deconstructed. These efforts are also acknowledged at international level that she got Oscar for her documentary.

Lacan’s Concept of *Objet a*

The focusing term in desire is *Objet a* which is “perceived as missing piece, and shows that Other is not clearly distinguished from self”. Furthermore, “its main task is to keep itself circulating”. Its pursuit is towards the meaning via *Objet a* which is further described as “the enjoyment of other”. The *Objet a* is not giving a mere excuse to pursuit but it directs towards lacking of self. “It was not necessarily ever missing. It’s just a perception”(Sheikh, 2017, p. 9).

Desire is created in Real when it turns from Symbolic. It then returns as lack that is called as *objet a*. It is that *objet a* which ultimately returns because it was “faded behind the master signifier”. Its desire is “to accomplish the missing part”. In this way “the *Object a* is precisely there turn of the jouissance or part of being which is left from the subject when it is shaped by discourse”.The missing part was left while forming the body “which is not embodied the master signifier”. Simultaneously, “the *Object a* represents metonymically the total being that was lost when the concrete being faded behind signifiers”(Sheikh, 2017, p. 9). Sheikh further describes that “desire in any form is caused by concealment or suppression of

something”(2017, p. 9). Similarly, Bracher has categorized desire into four parts:

- (1) Passive narcissistic desire. One can desire to be the object of the Other’s love (or the Other’s admiration, idealization, or recognition).
- (2) Active narcissistic desire. One can desire to become the Other—a desire of which identification is one form and love or devotion is another.
- (3) Active anaclitic desire. One can desire to possess the Other as a means of jouissance.
- (4) Passive anaclitic desire. One can desire to be desired or possessed by the Other as the object of the Other’s jouissance.(Bracher, 1993, pp. 20-21)

Forgiveness as Desire in *A Girl in the River*

Lacan’s concept of *objet a* reflects the missing part or perception of missing piece. In *A Girl in the River*, Forgiveness is the main issue of desire. Both, Father and daughter are encountering with each other and would like to become the Master of other or other’s desire. Firstly, her Uncle tries to hold Saba’s desire(but she desires to be married with Qaiser) by proposing her marriage with his brother in law. He could not possess her desire and in this Master/Slave combat, Saba wins the first round. After it, there happens a counter attack on Saba and they think that they have conquered the other but she survives. In this way, the fight to possess other’s desire continues.

After the imprisonment of her father and Uncle, “forgiveness” becomes the emblem of desire which is also the key point of this research. Once Again Saba possess the power and she tries to possess the desire of other (her father and uncle) by not forgiving them. As she says that “even if someone powerful asks me, I will not forgive them”(Chinoy, 2015). She again utters that “they should be shot in public in an open market so that such a thing never happens again”(Chinoy, 2015). In this context, she identifies herself with her father and uncle who attempted her murder.

Forgiveness takes the form of desire which can't be attained by any party. Both parties desire to be a master of other. Her father does not repent (surrender). As he says that "She took our honor. Why did she leave home? So, I said no, I will kill you myself. You are my daughter; I will kill you myself. If I had seen Qaiser, I would have killed him too. I have gone and killed my daughter as per my **desire**. I am ready to spend my whole life in jail"(Chinoy, 2015). He desires to be the Master of his own decisions. Same is the case of her uncle. He says that "everything is about respect. Whatever he did was absolutely right"(Chinoy, 2015). He also does not surrender although Saba claims that "my uncle begged me to forgive in the court and I said, I will not forgive you"(Chinoy, 2015).

At the end of the documentary Saba surrenders against the social forces. As she says that "Sometimes, we have to listen the advice of these men. Qaiser is against the settlement. But his elder brother handles everything so we will have to follow his lead and has the ultimate decision"(Chinoy, 2015). Saba could not possess the desire to conquer others but still the missing part is in pursuit as she utters that "everyone knows that I forgave them for society's sake. But in my heart, they are unforgiving"(Chinoy, 2015). Same is the case with her father that he also could not possess the desire of other. He also says that "I have forgiven them and she has forgiven me. We have started a new life again. After this incident, everyone says that I am more respected. They say I am honorable man"(Chinoy, 2015).

At the end, the phenomenon of forgiveness remains unattainable. Both parties claim the possession of other's desire but they can't attain it. Saba is having a grudge in her heart and her father trying to associate it his assumed increased honor in society.

Unforgivable Forgiveness in *A Girl in the River*

One of the main issues of Chinoy's documentary is forgiveness of honor killing. The stance of the mentioned documentary is that forgiveness is increasing the rate of honor killing which goes beyond the true availability of justice to the victim as well. This section investigates the unforgiveable forgiveness by using the insights of

Jacques Derrida's *On Cosmopolitan and Forgiveness*. Derrida's *On Cosmopolitan and Forgiveness* was published in 1997 and translated into English in 2001. He discusses the multiple shades and variations of forgiveness. He claims that "forgiveness forgives the unforgiveness" (p. 32) which means that a true forgiveness is not possible. In the meanwhile, he also talks about the true and unconditional forgiveness which might be effective if both parties are ready to proceed the process. He asserts that:

I shall risk this proposition: each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then the 'forgiveness' is not pure – nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalising. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality. (Derrida, 2001, pp. 31-32)

Moreover, he believes in the impossibility of forgiveness as he mentions that "forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. It can only be possible in doing the impossible" (Derrida, 2001, pp. 32-33). He also gives reference of Hegel to maintain his stance that "Hegel, the great thinker of 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation', said that all is forgivable except the crime against spirit, that is, against the reconciling power of forgiveness" (Derrida, 2001, p. 34).

In addition, Derrida has doubts about the forgiveness and raises questions of what, whom etc. that "if I say, 'I forgive you on the condition that, asking forgiveness, you would thus have changed and would no longer be the same', do I forgive? What do I forgive? And whom? What and whom? Something or someone? This is the first syntactic ambiguity which will, be it said, occupy us for a long time. Between the question 'whom?' and the question 'what?'" (p. 38).

The impossibility of forgiveness remains the same from all conditions and aspects. The doubts stay in the shape of non-existence of absolute forgiveness.

Derrida further talks about the possibility of forgiveness (though remain unforgivable) in between the guilty and the victim. He strictly abolishes the intervention of third party because “as soon as a third party intervenes, one can again speak of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, etc., but certainly not of pure forgiveness in the strict sense” (p. 42). He discusses the concepts of “true forgiveness” which will be spoiled if third party intervenes. This is the act between two parties to establish it unconditional. On the contrary. He considers that intervention as “a ‘finalised’ forgiveness is not forgiveness; it is only a political strategy or a psycho-therapeutic economy” (p. 50).

After discussing Derrida’s concept of forgiveness, one can understand Chinoy’s view point in easy way. She raises her voice against the so-called forgiveness of honor killing. First of all, Saba is determined not to forgive her father and uncle who tried to kill her. In this context, she claims that “even if someone powerful asks me, I will not forgive them” (Chinoy, 2015) because she knows that the crime is unforgiveable. She shows courage to the social and emotional set up of society. Simultaneously, she says that “they should be shot in public in an open market so that such a thing never happens again. With God’s will, I am going to fight this case”(Chinoy, 2015).

On the contrary, the social set up got active and initially Saba’s uncle “begged [her] to forgive in the court and [she] said, I will not forgive you” (Chinoy, 2015). Till this time the process of forgiveness is pure because only two parties are involved (though she rejected his begging). It is also unconditional as no options of reconciliation are discussed. But it does not remain unconditional when third party intervene in the shape of society. She revisits her own decision by saying that “sometimes, we have to listen the advice of these men. Qaiser is against the settlement. But his elder brother handles everything so we will have to follow his lead and has the ultimate decision” (Chinoy, 2015).

Additionally, the intervention of third party has destroyed the spirit of forgiveness. Shafqat, the elder brother of Qaiser adds condition that “two, four, ten years? There is no alternate except compromise. We need to compromise. We are living in a neighborhood” which is endorsed by Qaiser by saying that “So if we ignore them, why would they ever cooperate with us?” (Chinoy, 2015). Ultimately, Saba has to be submissive against these forces beyond her own will. She forgives her father and uncle on the social pressure and on the intervention of third party, society.

This is not a true forgiveness because she is unwilling and she forgive them because of the pressure where she has no other option. It can also be claimed on the basis of Saba’s own confessional utterances that “everyone knows that I forgave them for society’s sake. But in my heart, they are unforgiven” (Chinoy, 2015). Furthermore, it can be said that “forgiveness forgives the unforgivable” (Derrida, 2001, p. 32).

Conclusion

To conclude, the study investigated forgiveness as the element of desire which is unattainable. Moreover, through it, it unleashed the myth of honor killing that it cannot be demolished through forgiveness. It further claimed that forgiveness is not the ultimate solution of honor killing because it cannot be true as social pressure was involved. The study has also shown that forgiveness can encourage the people towards honor killing when they are hopeful that they will be out of prison within a short span of time. At the same time, it proposes that the myth of honor killing can be deconstructed by giving awareness in the masses through critical debates. Simultaneously, the study has also mentioned that honor killing is not only the issue of Pakistan but an international problem.

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