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Book Review

Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan

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The gender-based inequalities in Pakistan are not only increasing but also worsening in terms of the degree of their negative consequences, particularly for women and girls as the primary victims (Ali *et al.*, 2022). Women and girls encounter discrimination at all levels, including inside and outside the home, within and outside their community, social and political domains and in the marketplace, both in physical and virtual spaces, which significantly impacts their everyday lives, access and control over education, health, and employment (Pourya Asl and Hanafiah, 2024; Iqbal *et al.*, 2012; Ejaz and Ara, 2011). Nadia Agha's book, *Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan*, offers timely and deep insights into this alarming situation of women and girls who live in the rural parts of the country and make up much of the total population. This book is a pioneering sociological analysis depicting the detailed picture of rural women's lives and their strategic encounters termed as 'bargaining with patriarchy' in the oppressive patriarchal structures of rural Sindh. This is the first of its kind for rural and remote areas of Pakistan, where patriarchal structures are considered relatively more potent due to tribal or semi-tribal social organisation of the research settings (Shah, 2016; Bhanbhro *et al.*, 2013), local customs and traditions that justify, support and maintain male authority and control over women's lives.

The author, Dr Nadia Agha, is a professor of Sociology with a PhD in Women's Studies. Her extensive experience and passion for research are evident in her numerous publications on women's issues in various media outlets. She is a regular contributor to Pakistan's oldest and largest circulated English daily, *Dawn*[1]. Dr Agha's scholarship and research, including this book, have been published in several high-quality international peer-reviewed journals, such as the Women's Studies International Forum and the Journal of Research in Gender Studies. Her expertise in the field has been recognised by the Higher Education Commission Pakistan[2], which awarded her the Research Award for Best Book Publication in Social Sciences.

Agha's book is a significant contribution to the field of feminist and gender studies. It will impact the field as the study challenges the perception of women as passive victims of patriarchy and instead portrays them as active

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[2] HEC Confers Research Awards & Best University Teacher Awards: https://www.hec.gov.pk//english/news/news/Pages/HEC-Confers-Research-Awards-&-Best-University-Teacher-Awards1010-370.aspx

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negotiators who navigate within male-dominated social systems. This has significant implications for feminist studies as it enhances our understanding of women's roles in patriarchal society. It provides a more nuanced perspective on agency and resistance that goes beyond the specific context of rural Sindh. Furthermore, Agha's discussion of how women's reproductive roles are perceived and controlled through marriage ties into broader global feminist concerns about the regulation of women's bodies. This is critical for understanding how sexuality is constructed and controlled in rural South Asian contexts, and it invites comparisons with other patriarchal societies where women's sexuality is similarly governed by cultural and familial honour.

This ethnographic qualitative research, which includes individual interviews, focus group discussions, and observation methods in 6 rural villages of a district in Upper Sindh, provides a comprehensive understanding of the topic by capturing and valuing insider perspectives. Agha employs Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of 'patriarchal bargain' (p. 27) in conjunction with Sylvia Walby's idea of 'private patriarchy' (p. 28) as a theoretical lens. This framework provides a clear structure for the analysis, enhancing the reader's understanding of the lives of rural women in their natural social groups, including families, castes, clans, tribes, sub-tribes and kin groups. Despite the challenges faced by a female researcher conducting in-depth qualitative research in villages of a district in Upper Sindh and interacting with men and women on a sensitive topic, she has done an excellent job. Upper Sindh is a region located in the northern part of the southern province of Pakistan. Nafisa Shah, who was the former mayor of the district, was also the first person to highlight the issue of murders of women and girls in the name of honour in the local language known as *karo-kari*[3] and in English, commonly called honour killing. When Shah (2016) came from Oxford to do her fieldwork in Upper Sindh, she referred to it as the 'violent world of Upper Sindh' (p. 15) because this region is notorious for a particular form of honour crime known as *karo-kari* (honour killing), which is most prevalent in this area. Therefore, conducting fieldwork in this region on such a sensitive issue is a courageous undertaking and demonstrates the author's commitment to the feminist cause. Agha has identified herself as a feminist since childhood (p. 43). She mentioned participating in an essay competition where she wrote about the same topic she chose for her PhD research. However, it would have been more beneficial to discuss how her positionality as an educated, employed, middle-class and feminist woman has influenced her research processes, data collection, and analysis.

The book provides a comprehensive understanding of patriarchal structures, including 'patrilineal kinship, patrilocal residence, extended family, gendered division of labour, son preference, dowery, and early marriage' (p. 35). These are fundamental features of patriarchy and are shared by the South Asian region; these not only maintain patriarchy but provide the central infrastructure to thrive. Throughout the book, the author provides a comparison of neighbouring countries and literature to back up their arguments. Agha argues that despite these *oppressive* (emphasis is mine) patriarchal structures, rural women negotiate with patriarchy through tactical positioning within their households, using creative assets of handcraft for income generation, and expanding their agency through domestic chores. In her analysis, Agha challenges the assertion that women's mobility is often associated with their autonomy and economic status. Through ethnographic data, she demonstrated that a family's structure, whether nuclear, joint or extended, age and other factors are associated with the women's participants' autonomy and mobility. For example:

> [An] older woman may not always be autonomous but can often be mobile than younger women; similarly, a younger woman may be somewhat autonomous but cannot be mobile as older women are. (p. 201)

Agha's analysis of the intersections between poverty, illiteracy, and patriarchy in rural areas is based on detailed narratives collected from the field. However, it raises questions about whether patriarchy in urban poor areas of Pakistan is different in its nature and level of oppression. Pakistan has poor performance in human development indicators; for example, Pakistan ranks 145th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2024 (World Economic Forum, 2024). An estimated 22.8 million children (aged 5-16 years) in Pakistan are out-of-school children; 53% of females (15-64 years) reported that they never attended school, compared to 33% of males in the same age range. The overall labour force participation rate (LFPR) of women in Pakistan is 21%, which stands well below the global percentage at 39%. At the national level, the refined LFPR of women (aged 15-64 years) is very low at 26% compared to 84% for men (UN Women, 2023). Further, of those two central patriarchal notions, *ghairat/izzat* (honour) and *purdah* (veil), which define Pakistani women's lives, the latter is not strictly observed in rural areas as compared to urban settings.

[3] It is a Sindhi language term that is literally translated as a blackened man and a blackened woman. After the invention of the term honour killing in late 1990, the term *karo-kari* was labelled as honour killing. Initially, terms were used for 'adulterer' and 'adulteresses', but this term is now used for multiple forms of perceived immoral behaviour. It describes a social practice whereby a woman and a man found in, or more often suspected of, an illicit relationship is killed by family members to restore family honour.

The different forms of the marriage systems, including early exchange and consanguineous marriage, socio-cultural and economic factors behind them and the implications for women and girls have been presented as the significant devices which help patriarchy to operate and maintain itself in these rural settings. The author has discussed in detail a few prevalent forms of marriage in the research settings; however, there are several other types of marriage, such as a marriage by exchange of money, known as *vekro* in the local language, which literally means selling of a woman for marriage, has been commonly practised in Pakistan and essentially treat women and girls as a commodity that can be bought and sold (Bhanbhro, 2021). The argument of different forms of marriage being a pivotal tool to maintain patriarchy is built on the notion that in Pakistan and parts of patrilineal India is that 'men are seed providers to the wombs of women and women are regarded as the field that nourishes the seed' (p. 70-80). This conception of women being the soil for sowing male seeds suggests that marriage is a formal contract by which a husband gets a place (womb) to implant his seeds. This leads to another patriarchal notion, 'honour', which is a mechanism to control women for keeping the seed pure. So, the women of one's family should bear pure seeds of their own; if they are mixed with somebody else's seed, then they are defective [impure]. That becomes a source of dishonour, and people can kill or be killed for family honour. Therefore, honour crimes against women and girls are prevalent in Pakistan.

The author also discussed this practice and wrote, 'Rural Sindh is known to be a tribal area and the birthplace of honour killing' (p. 25). Though a form of honour killing called *karo-kari* is prevalent in rural areas of Upper Sindh (Shah, 2016; Bhanbhro *et al*., 2013; Bhanbhro, 2021), the author's claim that these are birthplaces of honour killing is unfounded and ahistorical as violence and murders for the sake of honour has been a historical and cross-cultural phenomenon (Giordano, 2016, 2001; Fournier *et al*., 2012; Goldstein, 2002). For example, the earliest explanation of honour that underlies violence and killings is that it developed in small-scale herding and pastoralist face-to-face communities such as Mediterranean societies (Campbell, 1964; Peristiany, 1965; Pitt-Rivers, 1968), where there was a weak or an absence of state structures (Schneider, 1971). It evolved as a social norm to maintain and assess the social position of an individual, family or a social group in the social structure that is subjected to damage through their social and moral behaviours, specifically, the sexual conduct of women (Campbell, 1964; Perstiany, 1965; Abou-Zeid, 1965; Bourdieu, 1965; Pitt-Rivers, 1968), maintaining the distinctive group differentials (Ortner, 1978), and protecting the economic basis of their culture, which is vulnerable to lose through theft, raiding, encroachment and rivalries on resources with neighbouring groups (Campbell, 1964; Schneider, 1971). Moreover, a study titled 'Honour crimes in contemporary Greece' (Safilios-Rothschild, 1969) published in the British Journal of Sociology discusses violent crimes like *karo-kari* (honour killings) committed in defence of a dishonoured female family member, coining the term 'honour crime.' However, the term 'honour killing' is not used. Similarly, a 1981 study in *Current Anthropology* examines homicides for family honour among Israeli Muslim Arabs, again avoiding the term 'honour killing' (Kressel, 1981). Additionally, honour killings have been reported in various parts of the world, including Albania, Chechnya, the Philippines, Latin America, MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries, and South Asia, particularly in India, Pakistan, and Nepal (Fisk, 2020; Xhaho, 2011; Chesler, 2010; United Nations Population Fund, 2000; Goodwin, 1994; Brooke, 1991). These killings also occur in immigrant communities within countries that do not otherwise have societal norms promoting such acts. Historically, honour killings were practiced in Mediterranean Europe, including countries like Italy, Greece, and France (Grzyb, 2016). Therefore, I argue that the practice of honour killings does not have originated in Sindh as claimed by the author in this book; its actual origins remain unknown. Historically, there have been reports of this practice across various societies, primarily targeting women and girls in the name of honour.

In relation to the origin of *karo-kari* in Sindh, Shah (2016), in her ethnography 'Honour and Violence', argues that *karo-kari* originated in the territories of Baloch tribes in the Balochistan province of Pakistan and travelled with the Baloch diaspora in Sindh. In her book, she mentions that her participants describe *karo-kari* as a 'spillover' of the Baloch custom of *siyahkari* (which also means 'being black') and that it is considered to be a part of the Baloch honour system (p. 31). Nonetheless, the practice of killing women and girls (and men and boys in some cases) for the sake of family honour has a long history and is known by local names, whereas the term 'honour killing' is a recent invention. Grewal (2013) argues that, as a media-invented-and-led term, honour killing circulates as a symbol of cultural deviancy and as 'a crime of culture' (p. 3), which not only describes honour as a cultural ideology but is also seen as a fixed cultural 'pathology' (p. 4). Also, honour was attributed as an underlying reason for horrible violent practices, including duelling in England, foot binding in China, wife immolation in India and the honour-based system of retribution in the Southern States of the USA (Bhanbhro, 2023).

Moreover, until recently, in Pakistan, these kinds of killings have been traditionally viewed as the problem of ethno-linguistic groups such as Sindhis and Balochs. For instance, the term *karo-kari* is a Sindhi-language expression which means black male-black female. This implies that the victim has blackened themselves by bringing dishonour to the family by engaging in illicit pre-marital or extra-marital relations. In Pakistan, the term is still predominantly used by print and electronic media and state institutions to label such crimes, whether the incident occurred in Sindh province or elsewhere in Pakistan (Bhanbhro, 2015). However, killings of this sort

occur across Pakistan. The analysis of annual reports published by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) shows that over 15,222 honour killings have been recorded in the country between 2004 and 2016. This figure excludes attempted honour killings and other forms of honour-related violence. This means an average of 1170 honour killings annually and 22 per week (Bhanbhro, 2023). They are known by regional names such as *Kala-Kali* (Punjab), *Tor-Tora* (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and *Siyakari* (Balochistan).

The book's second part focuses on women's strategies for negotiating with patriarchy not only for their survival but also as a form of resistance. It provides interesting insights and highlights this understudied aspect of rural women's lives. They are seen as docile actors of the patriarchal regime who need saving all the time. Agha's detailed analysis of women's negotiations and bargaining with patriarchy to gain power within a household through bearing a male child, income generation through handicrafts to contribute to household income, making alliances with other family women, including mother-in-law, being obedient to win support from different male and female older family members are activities they do to tactically improve their status in the house and negotiating power with husband. Based on the analysis of strategies applied by women to negotiate with patriarchy, Agha argues that

> women in the villages of Khairpur are not just passive victims of their lot; they actively negotiate with patriarchy. They work to embrace the system and try to perform well. In so doing, they exhibit a high degree of reflexivity and agency, both of which are actively in play. (p. 257)

The book offers a thorough and insightful analysis of how marriage practices serve as the foundation of patriarchy, ensuring its ongoing unchallenged power. In Pakistan and among people of Pakistani origin worldwide, marriage must be approved by one's parents, sanctioned by the religion, and registered by the state. One's social group must witness the wedding ceremony. Agha's book provides new insights into the impact of patriarchy in rural Pakistan. It challenges the perception of women as passive victims and instead portrays them as active negotiators within male-dominated social systems. The detailed analysis of patriarchal marriage practices and their impact on women's autonomy is crucial for understanding how patriarchy perpetuates itself. It offers practical insights into how patriarchal systems are intertwined with socioeconomic factors like poverty and illiteracy. It provides a framework for understanding grassroots strategies of economic empowerment. The book emphasises the importance of education, economic independence, and social support networks in empowering women and challenging local and global feminist narratives. It is essential reading for scholars and practitioners interested in gender, feminism, development, and sociology. Furthermore, it offers hope and strategies for change in patriarchal contexts. Therefore, it should be widely read.

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