

# Self-Aggrandizement and Squeezed Social Space for Women in Pakhtun Society

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## Abstract

Women in every society across the globe face varying degrees of problems and discrimination. Pakhtun society is no exception. In terms of *cultural relativity* problems of Pakhtun society and that of women are peculiar. A very important cultural characteristic of Pakhtun society is excessive self-aggrandized identities, which have complex implications for the whole society. But for women, self-aggrandizement has several anti-social implications. This paper explores the consequences of self-aggrandizement, prevalent among Pakhtuns, for women and the impact it has on their empowerment, mainstreaming and attainment of fundamental rights.

**Key words: Pakhtuns, Women, Self-Aggrandizement, Social Space.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Pakhtun society falls within the ‘category of classic patriarchy’ (Moghadam, 1992) where there is very little social space for women (Moghadam, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1988). Pakhtun tribal ethnic group in comparison to other ethnic groups in Pakistan is considered more conservative regarding gender relations (Khan, 2007; Ferdos, 2005; Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987) as well as the custom of *Purdah* (seclusion of women) have remained relatively unchanged over time (Malik, 1997; Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987). There have been a number of reasons for its perpetuation of *purdah* in Pakhtun society. The foremost has been the over of men the society which most of them have been using to their utter gender and personal advantage. Patriarchy as a system provides material advantages to Pakhtun males while placing constraints on the roles and activities of females thus ensuring their docility (Aina, 1998). In such system men control social, political and economic institutions, keeping women socially, economically and politically disempowered in society. Here it is important to describe that how this system of women marginalization works. This disempowerment is sustained by a process of gender role socialization which begins from the fundamental social institution of ‘family’ and is reinforced by education, literature and religion (Bryson, 1999). Thus, patriarchy is ‘structurally’ manifested in the hierarchical organization of social institutions and social relations, for example: father, brothers, husband and sons in the family institution. However, the maintenance of such a structural/hierarchical order and the continuation of domination of few are dependent upon its acceptance by many. The ‘patriarchal belief’ serves to reinforce this acceptance (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). Such ‘structural’ and ‘belief’ system of male domination upholds the mechanism and practices which historically have enabled men to gain and maintain their dominance and restrict social space for women.

In traditional Pakhtun society, ‘*Pakhtunwali*’ as a mechanism and set of practices as well as a source of pride (for Pakhtun men) bequeath men to contain women (unpublished PhD thesis). *Pakhtunwali* as a Pakhtuns’ ideal code of conduct absolutely negates women empowerment because the centre of these practices is mostly honour and the notion of honour is incomplete without the element of women in Pakhtun society. In other words, women serve as the fuel in the furnace of *Pakhtunwali* to keep up the dominance of males in Pakhtun society. The perception of ‘women’ for Pakhtun women is constructed in the context of ‘*Pakhtunwali*’.

## ***Pakhtunwali* and Patriarchy**

Pakhtun patriarchal social structure is legitimized by the ideological construct of *Pakhtunwali*. It is the tribal code, an unwritten law, a socio-political culture, and an ideology inherited from ancestors and transmitted to next generations (Barth, 1975:105; Khan, 1990). Rahman (1995) describes *Pakhtunwali* as a conservative, naturally democratic, centuries-old but still a young phenomenon in the Pakhtun culture and socioeconomic structure. This tribal code demands honour, hospitality, and generosity for anyone who asks for pardon or protection, and an absolute obligation to take revenge for any type of oppression. Barth (1981) has identified three major principles which serves as a foundation of *Pakhtunwali* that is *Melmastia*: hospitality and the honourable uses of materials and goods, *Jirga*: councils and the honourable pursuit of public affairs and, *Purdah* (literal meaning: veil; seclusion of women) and the honourable organization of domestic life. Other anthropologists have described *Pakhtunwali* as an ideal-type code based on the principles of *Namoos* (honour), *Badal* (revenge), *Melmastia* (hospitality), *Nanawatee* (refuge), *Tor* (female honour), *Tarburwali* (agnatic rivalry) and *Ghairat* (Bravery) (Grima, 2004; Lindholm, 1982; Ahmed, 1980).

All the above mentioned principles of *Pakhtunwali* in one or another way revolve around men's honour and Pakhtun men's honour undoubtedly revolves around women (Zulfacar, 2006, Johnson and Waheed, 2011). There is a dominant perception among Pakhtun women that Pakhtun men through the cultural discourse of *Pakhtunwali* control and subjugate women in order to safeguard their honour. Thus, *Pakhtunwali* proves to be perpetuator of patriarchy in Pakhtun society. In this regard many scholars (see for example: Sierakowska-Dyndo, 2013; Jacinto, 2006; Drumbl, 2004; Riphenburg, 2003; Moghadam, 1999 and 2002) have maintained that deep rooted patriarchy is essentially an outcome of *Pakhtunwali* in the Pakhtun society, as it serves, they argue, the interests of the men only. Among these scholars the most important argument is presented by Moghadam (1999: 176) who argues that by virtue of the organization of Pakhtun society along patrilineal lines, women and children become property of men. Once assimilated into men's property, women become objects of control for men. This further implies gender segregation and male dominance, both of which contribute to lack of women empowerment in this established social order. Similarly, Jacinto (2006:13) having almost the same view maintains that *Pakhtunwali* essentially turns women into transferrable property owned by men. Following this, *Pakhtunwali* has specific

gender implications for both men and women, wherein it serves as a cultural resource for men to justify the subjugation of women, but also to treat them in ways that perpetuates and reinforce patriarchy.

Some scholars even denounce *Pakhtunwali* by associating it with religious fundamentalism and find it necessary that if women empowerment and development is to be infused among Pakhtuns, the *Pakhtunwali* needs to be eroded altogether in the long run (Jagadish, 2009:44). Jagadish (2009:47) has an issue with the whole social structure of Pakhtun society and claims that, the best long-term strategy is to erode the tribal structures altogether. Others scholars consider *Pakhtunwali* as misogynic and thus hold it responsible for the violations against women's rights in Pakhtun society. Jacinto maintains that the deep-seated patriarchal structures among Pakhtuns are an outcome of the cultural discourse of *Pakhtunwali* which views women as chattel (Jacinto, 2006:10). Similarly, Drumbl (2004:352) asserts that the *Pakhtunwali* creates a situation of sexual terror as a social justice system when women are used for the purpose of establishing peace in the community. Certain writers have also pointed at the role of Pakhtun values in the formation and reinforcement of the tribal social structure, which in turn has been the great impediment in the development of Pakhtuns (Khan, 2009).

These explanations of *Pakhtunwali* in terms of subjugating women make it essentially a masculine construct that serves the interests of Pakhtun men only and relegates women to bear the brunt of men's honour.

### **Pakhtuns' Honour and Patriarchy**

The concept of honour, particularly in the Mediterranean context, has been explored to a great extent in social sciences. Honour has been understood to be at the centre of social structure in the Muslim world (Naji, 2012; Khurshid, 2012; Baxter, 2007; Awwad; 2001; Ruggi, 1998; Abu-Lughod, 1985, 1990). Most of the writers (see for example: Baker et al., 1999; Kollmann, 1999; Stewart, 1994; Peristiany, 1966) while discussing the concept of honour agree that it is a social construct and thus, can only be explored effectively by not only locating it in its specific culture but also taking account of the time. Hence, the concept of honour is difficult to define, and different scholars have provided different definitions based on their understanding of it. However, most of the definitions agree that honour operates at both personal and communal levels. Julian Pitt-Rivers provided one of the concrete definitions of honour as it is the value of a person in his own eyes as

well as in the eyes of his society. It is a person's estimation of his own worth and his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society and his 'right to pride' (Pitt-Rivers, 1966:48). Same is the case in Pakhtun society where honour is perceived as a source of self aggrandizement. The personal as well as the communal acknowledgement of a Pakhtun being 'honoured' makes him a proud being in society. Thus, a Pakhtun's aim of life revolves around this acceptance, which he strives to earn through protecting his honour till death.

The personal and communal acceptance of honour has been elaborated by Frank Stewart by identifying two related meanings of honour: internal and external; the former being one's self-evaluation of being worthy of respect, and the latter community's evaluation of one's respect (Stewart, 1994:13). Nancy Kollmann makes the same argument about the personal and communal facet of honour, as she contends that honour shapes both personal aggrandized identity and place in community (Kollmann, 1999:25). The personal and communal facets of honour are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. It is, however, the communal facet of honour that tends to inform the personal facet of honour. In this way, honour has been understood in terms of conforming to social norms that bestow virtue and respect to individuals.

Likewise for Pakhtuns, conformity to *Pakhtunwali* is the determinant of honour as well as their aggrandized attitudes. Pakhtuns' honour is largely associated with women and a Pakhtun's pride (aggrandizement) is determined by the extent to which men protect their honour. In Pakhtun society women's embodiment as honour makes them a form of property which reinforces the existing power relations in society. In this regard, Moghadam argues that by virtue of being at the center of the honour code, women are subject to control and subordination that include restrictive codes of behavior and gender segregation (2002:20). Moghadam further maintains that women's segregation is central to an 'honour-shame complex', which in turn leads to women's subjugation. Similarly, Bates and Rassam (1983:218) note for the Middle East that the linkage between familial honour and control over women demands that women be segregated and shunned from the public sphere. Rubenberg (2001:43) is of the same view and contends that in the Middle East honour is crucial to gender identity and that it essentially leads to gender oppression. In the same way, associating the honour code with women's subjugated status in the Middle East, Abu-Rabia-Queder (2008:215) argues that, being an honourable woman means conforming to feminine norms: being passive, hidden, unseen. The association of honour with men's control of women has an

implied proposition regarding women's agency; that is to say, that the honour-shame complex lends women a passive role to be controlled and subjugated.

The honour-shame complex through which women in Pakhtun society are associated with men's honour is expressed as '*Namoos*' in Pakhtu language. For Pakhtun women, the honour of a Pakhtun man and the honour of all females for whom he is responsible are interdependent as the code of *Pakhtunwali* implies (Bari, 2000). However, there is considerable pressure on women as the repositories of family honour to maintain harmony and minimize actions that would jeopardize the stability of the family and community (Abraham, 2000; Bari, 2000). It is through honour that women are successful in establishing a dignified position and role in the family. For women, honour is acquired through 'acknowledging life as a series of hardships' and then enduring those hardships with 'modesty, restraint, timidity and patience' (Grima, 2004:85). Wexler (2011:117) has almost the same view about the concept of honour as essentially subjugating women and argues that the Pakhtuns' conception of honour not only promotes women's subjugation but also restricts women's role to the household. In particular, women can do little outside their homes to maintain their families' honour. In other words, the principles of *Pakhtunwali* or the 'honour-shame complex' requires women to observe complete *Purdah* (literal meaning: veil; seclusion of women). *Purdah* is considered among the Pakhtuns as the effective way to defend a female's reputation and males honour (Pakhtun's pride) (Rzehak, 2011; Billaud, 2009; Khan and Samina, 2009; Papanek, 1982), however, proving to be highly restrictive to women empowerment and development. Laird (2007:15) notes that the practice of *Purdah* can be neatly summarized in the local expression of '*chadar and chardiwari*', literally meaning, the veil and the four walls. This expression encapsulate the idea that women are protected and family honour is retained so long as women remain out of sight and out of reach of unrelated males, when sheltered by the four walls of the home, or when compelled to leave home by an obscuring veil. This idea completely restricts women's social life by limiting their activities to the family house or compound and assumes that only men can engage in public activities. According to Lindsey Young (1984: 53): 'the reasons for seclusion of women in the Muslim context stem from the ideology of honour and shame culture, where chastity and modest behaviour are essential for women, in terms of maintaining and

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§ *Namoos* is a Pakhtu language term which can be translated as 'honour', 'reputation', 'esteem', 'conscience', and 'chasteness', and it can denote all female members of a household as well (Rzehak, 2011: 16). *Namoos* as a tenet of *Pakhtunwali* associates men's honour with women and requires Pakhtun men to protect women from public gaze and to react strongly if the modesty of women is questioned (Billaud, 2009; Rzehak, 2011).

upholding the family honour. The association of women with the *chardiwari* (home) in Pakhtun society is so strong that sometime ‘women’ and ‘home’ are used synonymously as ‘*Kor*’ (literal meaning: home) in *Pakhtu* language. The *Pakhtu* term for ‘wife’ is ‘*kor-wala*’, which literally means the one in the home. This honour-shame complex in the context of *Purdah* is best expressed in a famous *Pakhtu* proverb saying that, ‘*Na ye kor shta, na ye paighor shta*’, referring to a man who does not have any female in his house, that’s why he will never receive any kind of taunts (*paighor*) in society.

The honour-shame complex is also at work behind the practice of ‘honour-killing’. The Pakhtun concepts of ‘*tor*’ (stigma; literally meaning ‘black’ in *Pakhtu* language) and ‘*Paighor*’ (taunt) are almost exclusively applied when a woman is molested or otherwise dishonoured. Other instances may include when women try to escape an unwanted relationship in case of forced marriages, exercising choice regarding whether to marry or not, and whom to marry. It is important to note that even the suspicion of any kind of these acts that is seen to transgress social norms is sufficient for besmirching a Pakhtuns’ honour. Other examples include even a conversation with another man (*na-mehram*) or a past relationship. Such kind of acts brings ‘*tor*’ (stigma) to the family, followed by *Paighor* (taunt) from people in the community. Ideally this ‘blackness’ (*tor*, stigma) must be ‘whitened’ and the taunt (*Paighor*) can be escaped only by taking revenge, which in the context of Pakhtuns, often means killing the accused woman and man in order to restore the lost honour, though the accused woman is more often the victim than the man. Besides the biased attitudes of Pakhtun men by killing only the women culprit and letting men go. Women still have to pay the price in the form of *Swara*\*\* in cases where they are not at all the culprit.

Women (under the honour-shame ideology) serve as passive actors in dispute settlements in cases of other kinds of murders committed by males in Pakhtun society. Despite being outlawed in Pakistan, *Swara* is still practiced among Pakhtuns. *Swara* means giving away a woman as reparation in settling blood feuds between two parties. It can either involve giving away a woman by the guilty to the aggrieved party or it can be the exchange of women between the two parties. *Swara* is specifically practiced among the Pakhtun people of Pakistan, who live in rural areas where local customary laws are in force. There is no scholarly literature available on the custom of *Swara* in Pakistan, and among a few works present mention it in the context of violence against

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\*\* The term ‘Swara’ refers to the practice of giving (in marriage often forced) female relatives (daughters, sisters, or female cousins) by the aggressor to the victims’ family as compensation for damage done in terms of life

women in Pakistan without providing any explanation (Nosheen and Mumtaz, 2014; Shah and Tariq 2013; Iqbal et al., 2012; Khan 2012). However, the practice continues as the guilty family is bound to hand over the girl that the aggrieved family asks for. Iqbal et al. (2012:18) point out that it is usually, the nearest virgin female such as daughter, sister or niece of the offender family who is given away to the aggrieved family. Although it is usually daughters and sisters who are sacrificed in *Swara* and if the guilty party does not have any unmarried female available, female cousins or even distant female relatives can be handed over to the aggrieved family (Khan, 2012:3). Pakhtun men consider *Swara* as the only ‘honourable’ way to end the conflict. While this understanding of *Swara* marriages clearly serves men’s interests by upholding the honor-shame complex from the men’s perspective, it certainly comes at cost of the women’s well-being, as it shifts the heaviest burden on their empowerment and development.

Although, its men who are at the center of interpersonal conflicts and even then greater importance is paid to the interests of men in the process of conflict resolution. In societies where women are not well-positioned to play an active role in conflict resolution, it is usually women who bear the brunt of the conflict. Women in such situation not only become a source of conflict resolution in the form of *Swara*, but their killing in the conflict is also subject to differential treatment. For instance, it is evident from an unequal compensation for the murder of women and men in Pakhtun society, wherein the murder of a woman requires no compensation as compared to that of a man (Osanloo, 2012). It is men’s interests that are at the heart of the emergence as well as resolution of conflicts. Therefore, it is no surprise that having served the interests of the dominant group of society (men), such informal justice systems continue to persist despite the existence of a formal justice system in Pakhtun society (Offiong, 1997).

Besides having other options for dispute settlements in murder related cases in Pakhtun society, *Swara* is still considered to be the most honourable settlement arrangement by the offended party. The other two possible options of dispute settlement that is *bakhshesh* (forgiveness) and *Qisas/Diyat* (blood money) are usually not considered because the option of *bakhshesh* (forgiveness) brings shame for the offended party while, *Qisas/Diyat* (blood money), on the other hand, is usually rejected by both guilty and offended parties in a given feud. The offended party rejects receiving blood money because it will bring ‘*Paighor*’ (a taunt to ‘honour’) to the family, as receiving it is considered to be akin to ‘selling a kin’s blood’ (khan, 2016:74) The offender’s family does not prefer giving blood money to the offended party because, settlement made through



blood money usually not last long and most probably re-emerge more violently. Under the umbrella of honour-shame ideology, *Swara* proves to be the only effective mean in the resolution of conflicts as women are expected to bridge the relationship between the disputants. However, the potential role of women to establish good relations between the disputants is constrained by men themselves. Men from both the offended and offender parties exercise control over women given in *Swara* in such a way that it becomes impossible for the women to play her part in establishing good relations between the two parties.

In comparison to the regular marriages, marriage by *Swara* proves to be highly disadvantageous for women for a number of reasons. Let alone pursuance of education and professional career, a girl in *Swara* usually does not have any idea that to whom she is getting married in the offender family, she might not have a desirable match. Even her parents or elders do not have a say in the decision to which person in the offended family she is being wedded off as *Swara*. Similarly, a girl given in *Swara* is more likely to have restrictions on her natal relationships. This is particularly disadvantageous for the girls given in *Swara* because they lose the important social safety net of her natal family which girls in regular marriages enjoy. Apart from that, due to the imposed nature of this type of marriage, the husband of a girl given in *Swara* is more likely to take a second wife, which is common for the men who have had *Swara* marriages, resulting in a more vulnerable status of the girl given in *Swara* in her marital family. Her vulnerable status in the family makes her susceptible to violence not only from her husband, but also from other in-laws including both males and females. In a nutshell, the practice of *Swara* proves to be an absolute threat to women empowerment and sheer violation of human rights.

## **Male Dominance and Mate Selection**

The right to empowerment and social development of women is conditioned by men's 'honour' through using them as restorative in fact escapable tools in practices like *Swara*. Even the non-*Swara* (regular) marriages among Pakhtuns are arranged and matrimonial decisions are principally made by the men of the family. Deborah Smith (2009:15), however, argues that apart from gender, age also plays an important role in deciding that who will make marriage decisions in a family. She points out that senior males exercise more power in contracting nuptial ties for females in the

family. Smith notes, it is the oldest man in the household, such as the grandfather or elder uncle who has the greatest say in marriage decisions (Smith, 2009: 21).

Overall, men in traditional Pakhtun culture, begin influencing a girl's life at an early age, exerting authority on issues ranging from education to mate selection. It is usually the father or another elder man who leads the family in relation to public affairs and makes all important decisions regarding the marriages of family members (Ahmad, 2006). Fredrik Barth (1959), who has conducted extensive ethnographic work among Pakhtuns, explains the power structure in a Pakhtun family as, 'the husband and father has all authority; he controls the social intercourse of the family members to the extent of being able, at his pleasure, to cut his wife off from all contacts with her natal kin; he controls all property; ... and he alone has the right to dissolve the domestic unit or expel its members, by divorce or by disinheriting the children. These are his formal rights' (Barth, 1959:22). Pakhtun women also confirm Barth's observations; as for them, younger family member particularly women are seldom consulted regarding important family and their personal decisions like marriages.

A Pakhtun Girl is seldom consented and consulted about her would-be husband. Her future husband is decided by her father, brother, uncles or other close relatives. Seeking of consent of women is considered as lack of manliness and against the honour and respect of the family. The girl accepts or is compelled by customs to accept her husband decided by her family. Even if she does not like her husband, she does not have any say in this matter. If she refuses her husband before or after marriage, she is thought to stigmatize the honour and self-respect of her father's family therefore; she has to accept it by hook or by crook. After marriage, the husband and in-laws take control of a girls' life. They decide issues such as, the number of children she will have, what her role in the community will be, and what her limits are in seeking education or employment. She simply must accept the course of life directed by men in a patriarchal society (Shaheed and Mumtaz, 1993).

## **Conclusion**

It is concluded that Pakhtun society is highly patriarchal in nature having a culture denying women empowerment. Patriarchy as a system in Pakhtun society provides material advantages to Pakhtun males while placing constraints on the roles and activities of females thus ensuring their complete seclusion and docility in society. In such system men oppress women through social, political and

economic institutions, establishing women's social, economic and political disempowerment in society. In this regard, '*Pakhtunwali*' as a mechanism and set of practices bequeath men to dominate women. *Pakhtunwali* as a Pakhtuns' ideal code of conduct absolutely negates women empowerment because the essence of *Pakhtunwali* is honour and the notion of honour is incomplete without the element of women in Pakhtun society. Therefore, for Pakhtuns, conformity to *Pakhtunwali* is the determinant of honour as well as their aggrandized attitudes. It is also concluded from this study that as Pakhtuns' honour is largely associated with women therefore, a Pakhtun's pride (aggrandizement) is determined by the extent to which men protect their honour. Pakhtun women's embodiment as honour also makes them a form of property which reinforces the existing power relations in society. Women's embodiment as property further makes their position vulnerable in society when they are used by men as a bargaining chip for dispute settlement. Here again the tenets of *Pakhtunwali* like *jirga*, *Swara*, *Badal* (revenge taking, in the form of honour killings mostly) serves as a cultural resource for men to justify the subjugation of women and to treat them in ways that perpetuates and reinforce patriarchy.

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