



The Politics and Culture of "Honour Killing": The Murder of Fadime Şahindal

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ABSTRACT

Rahmi Şahindal, a Kurdish man who migrated from Turkey to Sweden in 1980, killed his daughter Fadime in the city of Uppsala on 21 January 2002. Rahmi and his son, Mesud, felt that Fadime had shamed the family by rejecting an arranged marriage, and by feeling free to love a partner of her choice, a Swedish man. She had, according to tradition, violated the codes of honour "*namus*." She had further "shamed" her father and brother by resisting their death threats, going public about their intentions, taking them to court, and by launching a campaign against honour killing. Rahmi told the police that he had to defend his (family's) honour by killing his daughter.

The murder of Fadime shocked Swedish society, although it was not the first or only case of such crimes in recent years. Immigrants and refugees, especially Kurds, feared that the killing would unleash a new wave of racism and racist attacks. The government faced criticism for failing to integrate immigrants and for its policy of "double standards," i.e., tolerance of male violence among (non-Western) immigrants and promotion of gender equality for the Swedish-born citizens. Swedish Kurds condemned the killing, although there was a tendency among some to reduce the murder to an isolated event, the problems of an individual, disturbed, person. The media, in Sweden and throughout the world, reported the event. In Sweden, there was extensive media coverage of the killing, the funeral of Fadime, public policy, and the clash of cultures. Some of the questions that were raised are: Is honour killing part of Kurdish culture? Is honour killing an Islamic tradition? Was the killing a question of the conflict of two cultures? What is the role of the Swedish government? What is the role of race and racism? What can be done to prevent honour killing and other forms of male violence against women?

This article addresses some of the questions related to the politics and culture of honour killing. It provides a critique of public policy in Sweden, Kurdish nationalist responses, and academic theories which play an active role in the conflict over this form of gender violence. The purpose of this critique is to contribute to the struggle against honour killing and other forms of violence against women.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF FADIME: A BRIEF ACCOUNT

Fadime Şahindal was seven years old when she moved to Sweden to join her father in 1984. According to press reports, her parents discouraged her from associating with Swedish children in school. They told her that she should eventually return to Turkey and get married there. Fadime's younger brother helped the father in controlling her sister, and physically abused her. In 1996, she met and fell in love with a Swedish student, Patrik Lindesjö, while taking a computer course. When Rahmi found out, he reacted by beating the couple. Patrik's parents went to see Fadime's parents and



propose, on behalf of their son, a marriage relationship. Rahmi rejected the offer (Hildebrandt 2002).

Fadime had to leave Uppsala, but continued to be threatened by her father and brother. She turned to the media and talked about the oppression of Kurdish girls in Sweden, the problems of integration and double standards. On a visit to Uppsala, her father spat in her face and shouted, "Bloody whore. I will beat you to pieces." She told the police: "He said I was rejected from the family and was not allowed to come back to Uppsala. If I did I would never leave the city alive." (Ibid) Rahmi was convicted in 1998 of making unlawful threats, but was given a suspended sentence. Her brother, 17 years old, called her a whore during the trial, was found guilty and sentenced to probation for one year. The father promised the court not to stalk Fadime, who had agreed to leave Uppsala.

Although Fadime had to hide from the male members of the family, she did not remain silent. She continued her campaign against "honour killing," while reminding everyone that she loved her father, although he did not know how to treat her better. In June 1998, while the couple were ready to move into an apartment, Patrik was killed as his car crashed into a concrete pillar.

Fadime moved to northern Sweden to study sociology, and travelled throughout the country to speak about patriarchal violence and the situation of immigrant women. In November 2001, she addressed the Swedish parliament. In January 2002, before leaving for Kenya to do field work for an M.A. thesis, Fadime decided to visit her mother and sisters and say farewell to them. She was at her sister's apartment, when at about 10 p.m. on 21 January, her father knocked at the door, entered the apartment, and shot her in the head. Fadime died in her mother's arms.

On February 4, thousands attended the memorial service for Fadime in Uppsala's famous fifteenth century Gothic cathedral. Her coffin was carried out of the church by six female family members and friends, followed by her mother. One of Fadime's sisters was carrying her portrait in front

of the coffin. The mourners were from very diverse backgrounds, including individuals like Crown Princess Victoria, the president of the parliament Birgitta Dahl, the minister of integration Mona Sahlin, and the highest representative of Swedish Protestant Church, Archbishop Amar. Fadime was buried in a private ceremony near the grave of her Swedish partner. There were demonstrations in Swedish cities in protest to the killing of Fadime and violence against women (see, among others, Agence France-Press 2002; Williams 2002)

SWEDISH GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

Sweden carries the image of a country where women are said to be sovereign. However, in spite of the progress made in the democratization of gender relations, patriarchal relations are still dominant, and violence against women is an indigenous phenomenon. Radical and leftist groups and some feminists have in recent years protested the government's policy of "double standards."

About fifteen percent of the nine million population is non-Nordic or non-White. Most of the immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East settled in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s. Public policy has over the years evolved in favour of respect for minority rights and tolerance of cultural differences. For instance, the legal age of marriage is fifteen for immigrants and eighteen for the rest of the population. Immigrant parents who want to cover the bodies of their children enjoy the right to exempt them from swimming courses; parents interested in gender segregation enjoy the right to remove their children from coeducational sports, sex education classes, and field trips. There is no protection against forced or arranged marriages. In dealing with violence against women, including honour killing, the courts tend to take into account the criminals' cultural background. For instance, in the case of a Lebanese Christian father who killed his young daughter, the court considered culture as a mitigating circumstance (Daragahi 2002).

Although instituted with good intentions, this policy of respect for cultural differences frustrates the integration of immigrants into



Swedish society. It treats each immigrant community as a monolithic entity, unified by a culture of gender oppression and patriarchal violence. This policy shows respect for the patriarchal tradition of immigrants but fails to show any respect for their century-long history of struggle for gender equality. But why does a social democratic government privilege the patriarchal regime of the immigrant communities, and assist them in its reproduction?

Whatever the dynamics of policy-making in Sweden, the policy on immigrants is informed by the theoretical claims of cultural relativism, which encourages ethnic, clan, tribal, national, and religious particularisms. This politics does not consider immigrants as an integral part of Swedish society, i.e., as citizens bearing the same rights and duties. It is not a policy aiming at the civic inclusion of immigrants who come from countries with diverse, often non-democratic, political systems. Immigrants, even when they are officially granted Swedish citizenship, are treated as "foreigners" rather than members of a civic nation. This policy is, thus, ethnocentric; it is the politics of an "ethnic nation." The "rule of law" is not universal; it depends on one's ethnic belonging.

Treating patriarchy as *the* sacred, uncontested, essential and inherent constituent of immigrants' gender relations, Sweden's policy lags behind the tradition of liberal feminism, which demands the civic inclusion of women through full legal equality. This policy delegitimizes what immigrants possessed in their country of origin - a feminist culture that often dates back to the late nineteenth century. It thus undermines the struggle of radical and liberal immigrant activists for the democratization of gender relations, and integration in Swedish society. This politics combines, neatly, ethnocentrism and antifeminism.

The killing of Fadime and the mass protest of immigrants against violence against women prompted government officials to reconsider their policy of appeasing the conservative element of immigrant communities. We have yet to see if there will be a radical shift toward treating patriarchy and its violence as a problem of Swedish democracy

rather than a particularism that immigrants have to live with.

RACISM IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Scandinavian societies are known for their tolerant, egalitarian, socialist and social democratic tendencies and traditions. Like other societies, however, the political spectrum in Sweden is diverse and includes conservative, racist, and fascist tendencies. The sharp and sudden increase in refugee populations in the 1980s, economic difficulties, and the coming to power of conservative regimes in some Western countries were among the factors that contributed to the rise of intolerance in civil society. Racism had an excellent opportunity to come into the open, and pose as a viable alternative to civic inclusion. The conservative, misogynist component of immigrants' gender relations provides adequate fodder for racists in promoting their ethnicist politics.

After the murder of Fadime, Swedish Kurds and even those in neighbouring countries feared racist reprisals. This fear was reported in a Finnish paper under the headline "Kurds in Finland fear racist reaction to Swedish honour killing" (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 24 January 2002). Referring to the killing of Fadime, the head of the Helsinki Red Cross youth shelter, said, "This kind of thing does not happen any more frequently in immigrant families than among Finns" (Ibid.). Racists, however, use such events in order to create an unbridgeable gap between the indigenous and immigrant populations. Even the American movie *Not Without My Daughter*, which depicts oppressive gender relations in Iran, has been widely used for racist and fascist propaganda against non-Whites in Europe and also in South Africa under the Apartheid regime.

KURDISH RESPONSES: THE HONOUR OF THE NATION

Honour killing, much like genocide, is a crime that few would want to be associated with. It tarnishes the image of the people, nation, country,



religion and culture that allows it to happen. When its occurrence cannot be denied, the damage is controlled by reducing it to an isolated event, or the problem of the individual killer. For nationalists, Kurdish and non-Kurdish, the defence of the honour of the nation has priority over the rights of women.

Swedish Kurds condemned the killing of Fadime, and many used the occasion to protest all forms of violence against women. However, there was a tendency to clean up the image of the Kurdish nation. If White racists claim that honour killing is an essential part of Kurdish (or non-Western) immigrant culture, Kurdish nationalists and Swedish government authorities deny its cultural import.

The debate centred on the killer's motivations. A Kurdish website, Kurdish Media, raised a question, and asked visitors to "vote" on three stated answers (retrieved on 15 February 2002):

I think Fadime's murder was mainly motivated by:

Religion	135	30.75 %
Culture	96	21.87%
Lost father in Western Culture	183	41.69%
Other	25	5.69 %
Total Vote	439	

There is no information on the ethnic or religious background of the voters. The poll does, however, show a strong inclination to reduce the crime to the problems of a father who has failed to integrate in a "Western culture." A considerable number of voters also locate the killing in religion, in this case Islam. Although about 22% relate the killing to culture, the dominant tendency is to absolve the culture of responsibility. Concerned about racist and media "demonisation of Kurdish men and the stigmatization of Kurdish culture," a Kurdish male student tried to find "a way out of this dilemma":

I believe that many Kurds find themselves in a dilemma and a state of ambivalence in the wake of the murder of Fadime. This is a result of the fact that many Kurds want

to admit that the murder of Fadime originated from a de facto existing notion of honour; but at the same time emphasizing that Kurdish culture as such does not sanction and legitimize honour killings.

There is a way out of this dilemma in my view. At the same time as one admits that the murder of Fadime was a result of this notion of honour, one can also underline the fact that an overpowering majority of Kurds cannot relate to this notion of honour, since Kurdish culture is not homogenous. And like all other cultures it is in a process of constant change. Only on the basis of an essentialist view of culture is it possible to claim that honour killing is an essential attribute of Kurdish culture - which many in the Swedish media tend to do, implicitly or explicitly. (Ahmedi 2002)

A non-essentialist view of culture, however, does not offer a "way out of this dilemma." That cultures do not consist of immutable essences is rather obvious, and such a claim does not offer insight into the intricacies of violence against women; it also fails to account for the competing claims of nationalists and racists, and does not provide a feminist alternative to androcentric interpretations.

THE PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF HONOUR KILLING: HONOUR KILLING AS CULTURE

"Culture" is one of the most controversial concepts in social sciences. Culture, according to one prevalent view, "entails recognition that all human beings live in a world that is created by human beings, and in which they find meaning. Culture is the complex everyday world we all encounter and through which we all move. Culture begins at the point when humans surpass whatever is simply given in their natural inheritance" (Edgar



1999: 102). Thus, culture consists of everything that is socially rather than biologically created and transmitted.

Honour killing has been a recurrent phenomenon in the everyday world of the Kurdish people. It is recorded in language, in writing, in oral tradition and in film; it has been discussed, condemned and resisted. How can it be outside culture? We will, however, argue that honour killing should not be reduced to a question of culture (more on this below).

Kurdish culture, like other Western and non-Western cultures, is not a homogeneous or monolithic entity. Kurdish gender culture, like its Western counterparts, consists of at least two conflictual components. One component is *patriarchy*, which is present in folklore, language, religion, literature, jokes, manners and, in a word, the "lived experience" of individuals. In its violent forms, this culture is inscribed in the blood of Fadime and countless women who have lost their lives in obscurity.

The other component of Kurdish culture is generally not well known, affirmed, valorized, confirmed, or promoted: this is the culture of struggle for gender equality. This culture emerged in the Kurdish press of the early 20th century (Klein 2001). It was inspired by the liberal feminist and women's movements of the late 19th and early 20th century Europe. The first Kurdish women's organization was established in 1919. By the mid-20th century, the greatest Kurdish poet of the modern period, Abdullah Goran (1904-1962), strongly condemned honour killing in one of his poems, *Berden û s ûk* "A Tomb-Stone" (see Kurdish text and translation in Mojab, forthcoming). In 1982, the Kurdish film-maker Yilmaz Güney strongly condemned patriarchal brutality in his movie *Yol* (Road).¹ Since the 1990s, there has been a considerable struggle against honour killing in Iraqi Kurdistan, where the 1988 genocide known as *Anfal* and the two Gulf Wars had destroyed the social fabric of society, and unleashed waves of patriarchal violence. Kurdish feminists in Kurdistan and elsewhere have created women's organizations, media, shelters, literature, and have organized

conferences. They have revolted against "their own," indigenous, Kurdish, regime of patriarchy.

Of the two components of Kurdish gender culture, patriarchy and feminism, the former is dominant. The two Kurdish nationalist governments in Iraqi Kurdistan protect and promote the patriarchal culture. Western governments, too, treat patriarchy as genuine Kurdish culture.

Denying or ignoring the existence of a culture of struggle for gender equality in Kurdistan or in other non-Western societies is a political position. It is patriarchal politics in the sense that it denies the universality of oppression of women and the struggle against it. It is racist in so far as it denies the ability of non-Western, non-White women to understand the conditions of their subordination, and ignores their determination to resist it.

It would be more accurate, then, to state that the killing of Fadime is in line with the dictates of Kurdish *patriarchal* culture. This culture is similar to, if not the same as, the Western, Christian, patriarchal culture which has allowed men and women to blow up abortion clinics and assassinate doctors who conduct abortions in the United States and Canada. One may argue that the culture of honour killing is traditional, tribal, feudal or rural. But killing women is by no means a uniquely Kurdish phenomenon. In the United States men kill 10 women every day. While these murders are not necessarily motivated by "honour," the motivations are hardly more humane. The decision of a woman to end a relationship prompts the male partner to kill her: seventy-four percent of these killings "occur after the woman has left the relationship, filed for divorce or sought a restraining order against her partner" (Seager 1997:26). Similarly, in Sweden, according to 1989 data, 39 women are battered daily and one is killed every 10 days by a man known to her (Elman and Eduards 1991: 411).

The culture of patriarchal violence is, thus, universal. Dividing cultures into violent and violence-free is itself a patriarchal myth. It turns into an ethnocentric or racist myth when this divide is drawn along the lines of the West and the East.



Moreover, while the existence of patriarchy as a culture cannot be denied, a cultural reductionist approach alone does not take us a long way in the struggle against male violence.

HONOUR KILLING AS THE EXERCISE OF GENDER POWER

Two centuries of feminist intellectual and political struggles in the West have imposed on nation-states a regime of legal equality between the genders. However, legal equality has failed to eliminate violence against women. Patriarchy in both Kurdish and Western societies is reproduced on an hourly and daily basis. It is reproduced by the family, the educational system, the state, religion, media, music, arts, language, folklore and all other social and cultural institutions. Thus, male violence against women cannot be reduced to a cultural trait, a cultural norm, or a dormant cultural value that occasionally pops out with the wrath of a violent man who has lost his honour. Neither can it be reduced to the psychology of the individual killer(s), although this dimension may play a role.

Honour killing is a tragedy in which fathers and brothers kill their most beloved, their daughters and sisters. When husbands kill their wives, in-laws consent and often actively participate in the crime. Sometimes mothers and sisters take part in the crime or consent to it. Killing occurs in a family system where members are closely tied to each other in bonds of affection, compassion and love. Here, affection and brutality coexist in conflict and unity. What does this contradiction tell us about honour killing as a form of the exercise of male power? How can this contradiction be resolved?

Given the universality and ubiquity of male violence - ranging from killing, to battering to rape - it would be more appropriate to look at honour killing and other forms of violence as means for the exercise of gender power, in this case male power. The exercise of gender power is intertwined with the exercise of class and political powers. A learned Kurdish mullah in the mid-19th century had a good grasp of honour killing as the exercise of gender power. Writing an essay on *Kurdish*

Manners and Customs in 1859-60, Mela Mehmud Bayezidi argued that tribal and rural Kurdish women were as free as the women of Europe; they could freely associate with men. He noted, however, that women could never engage in pre-marital or extra-marital relationships with a stranger. If they did they would be killed without hesitation and with impunity. No one would question the killers. It was a shame on the family that could be cleaned only through murder; it was also a shame on the community, the village, the tribe, the neighbours and the neighbourhood. The community participated in the killing by expecting it to happen, by endorsing it, and by casting out the family when it failed to kill the woman. Mela Mehmud noted that the purpose of the killing was to instil fear in women so that they would guard their modesty and chastity (see Mojab, forthcoming). Unfamiliar with feminist theory, Mela Mehmud's understanding of the exercise of gender power was nevertheless more advanced than contemporary "feminist" reductions of honour killing to "practice" (see below). The learned mullah felt free to discuss honour killing, as a Kurdish "custom and manner," in all its brutality.

If honour killing is a form of the exercise of gender power, what can be done to eliminate it under the existing regimes of gendered political power? What are the dynamics of the production and reproduction of honour killing in our times, in Kurdistan and in the West?

We realize that it is not easy to dislodge let alone eliminate honour killing and other forms of violence in the short run or in the absence of a radical transformation of the male-centred social and economic order. We argue, however, that (1) the killing of Fadime was not an isolated case or an abnormality; to see the murder as an anomaly is a convenient excuse for non-action; (2) a host of factors are involved in the reproduction of violence against women; (3) all of us are involved in one way or another in allowing this regime of male brutality to reproduce itself, and (4) much can be done in order to put an end to honour killing. We will first look at the factors that contribute to the reproduction of the crime.



KURDISH NATIONALISM

Kurdish nationalists have promoted the myth of the uniqueness of Kurdish women: like some Western observers of Kurdish society, they claim that Kurdish women enjoy more freedom compared with their Arab, Persian and Turkish sisters. Whatever the status of women in Kurdish society, Kurdish nationalism, like other nationalist movements, has been patriarchal, although it has also paid lip service to the idea of gender equality. For Kurdish nationalisms, nation building requires the unity of genders, classes, regions, dialects, and alphabets. They consistently relegate the emancipation of women to the future, i.e., after the emancipation of the nation. However, after Kurdish nationalism achieved state power in Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, its record in matters of gender equality has been bleak. Let's briefly look at this experience.

The Kurdish people have lived, since the late 1870s, in what Mark Levene (1998) has characterized as a "zone of genocide." In this zone (Eastern Anatolia comprising Kurdistan), the Ottoman state conducted genocide of the Armenian people in 1915 and, together with its successor, the Republic of Turkey, subjected the Assyrian and Kurdish peoples to numerous campaigns of genocide and ethnic cleansing. The Ba'th regime of Iraq ensured that this zone would continue to operate in spite of being divided between Iraq and Turkey in 1918. No less than ten thousand Kurdish villages were destroyed in Iraqi Kurdistan between 1975 and 1991 and in Turkey between 1984 and 2000.

The zone of genocide continues to be an active zone of war. These wars have destroyed the social, economic and cultural fabric of Kurdish society. They have unleashed waves of male violence against women. This explains, at least in part, why there are more incidents of honour killing among the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey compared with the Kurds of Iran, whose experience of war has been less devastating.

In the aftermath of the U.S.-led Gulf War of 1991, when the Iraqi army attacked Kurdistan,

millions of Iraqi Kurds escaped into the mountains in March and April. The U.S., U.K. and France created a no-fly zone, a "safe haven," in order to return the refugees. Two major parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which had been fighting the Iraqi government for decades, created the Regional Government of Kurdistan in 1992. This was a de facto Kurdish state with its parliament and administrative structure. However, in the course of parliamentary elections, male and female voters were segregated at the voting centers. Six of the 105 members of the parliament were women (5.7%). The two parties engaged in an internal war in 1994, which continued intermittently until 1996. Failing to resolve their conflict, they formed, by 1999, their own separate administrations. In the context of unprecedented increase in honour killing and women's suicides, they adopted Iraqi law which did not criminalize honour killing, and was lenient on the punishment of killers. Faced with opposition from women, the two parties, especially KDP, have tried to justify honour killing as a Kurdish and Islamic tradition. In 2000, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan issued two resolutions aimed at revoking Iraqi law, and criminalizing honour killing. The resolutions, which have the status of law in the absence of a legislative organ, have remained on paper in so far as the government has neither the will nor the power to enforce them.

If the KDP government has persistently ignored the demand for gender equality and for the criminalization of honour killing and the PUK government paid only lip service to them, they have both bowed to the demands of a handful of mullahs and their Iranian overlords. Kurdish mullahs, who never aspired to theocratic governance, now demand the Islamization of gender relations, and the subordination of Kurdish women according to the dictates of Islam. Financed and organized by the Iranian theocracy, some Kurdish Islamic groups aim at establishing a theocracy. Not surprisingly at all, Kurdish leaders who were secular before 1979, now entertain Islam and Islamists. The two Kurdish governments have opened more mosques than



women's shelters. In fact, they have not initiated any women's shelters. Even worse, the PUK government launched an armed attack on a women's shelter operated by an opposition political party (the shelter operated by the Independent Women's Organization in Sulemani).

Kurdish nationalism, in or out of power, has generally entertained patriarchy and legitimized its violence; it has little respect for the Kurdish tradition of struggle for gender equality. After ten years of self-rule in the no-fly zone of Iraqi Kurdistan, the women's press, consisting of only a few publications, is dwarfed by the bulky nationalist periodicals produced in the two major cities of Sulemani and Hewlêr. Not a single work of feminist theory has been translated into Kurdish. The text of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1979) has not yet appeared in Kurdish. The priority of most Kurdish intellectuals, males and females, is not opposition to gender inequality.

THE NATION-STATES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The states that rule over the Kurds do not criminalize honour killing, or are lenient on punishing killers. Iranian law provides for the execution of lesbians and gays, and the stoning to death of married adulterers.

These states deny citizens the right to life in so far as they practice capital punishment as a normal, unproblematic, indispensable means of governance. Turkey, which aspires to become a full member of the European Union, has refused to abolish capital punishment for all crimes (a requirement for membership). Not only does it engage in extrajudicial killing, Turkey reserves the right to kill citizens on charges of secessionism. This legal framework will allow more genocides and ethnic cleansing. Thus, Turkey wants to become an EU member while reserving what Leo Kuper (1981: 161-85) called the sovereign state's "right to genocide."

The coming to power of the theocratic Islamic regime in Iran unleashed waves of state-sponsored male terrorism against women. All Muslim states, from Algeria and Morocco in the West to Pakistan in the East, Islamized gender relations by introducing more Islamic *shari'a* into their legal system. A century of struggle for the separation of state and religion came under attack. The idea of separation of the powers of state and religion was branded by Iranian theocracy as a Western conspiracy against Islam. Women were the first targets of theocratic terrorism in Iran and, later, Afghanistan. Many Kurdish nationalist leaders, like the states in the region, embraced Islam. If theocrats have promoted stoning to death and honour killing as Islamic institutions, some Kurdish leaders have endorsed male violence as a national tradition.²

EUROPEAN STATES

There are now sizeable Kurdish communities in Europe, especially in Germany, Britain, France, Sweden and a number of other countries. While these states readily declared the Kurdistan Workers Party, PKK, a terrorist or criminal organization, they have not criminalized male terrorism against women. The policy of respect for cultural differences is a policy of respect for patriarchal power. However, we have learned from two centuries of democratic development that group "identity" and culture should not be the basis for the exercise of state power. How can one have any respect for any culture that endorses violence against women? The policy of respect for male brutality has no respect for the anti-patriarchal culture of the Kurds. Is it a matter of accident that there are always enough financial resources for the army and for war, but there is little investment in promoting feminist knowledge, the culture and politics of gender equality, the provision of shelters and other resources for terrorized women, Kurdish and non-Kurdish? Devoting the costs of a single Chieftain tank or a single Mirage aircraft to women's shelters, support for battered women and promotion of feminist knowledge will produce tangible results in promoting women's rights. Is it



an accident that governments began the new century with \$798 billion on military spending (2000 figure)? Why is this machinery of man-made violence so well funded?

Public policy in Europe and in North America has responded to some extent to academic debates on culture, identity, and difference. We are referring to academic research and theorization on the merits of diversity, difference and cultural relativism. While Western governments have taken some steps forward (e.g., admitting gender violence as a criterion for refugee status) it is not difficult to see the steps backward. We will deal with these briefly.

THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Our knowledge about violence against women, especially in the West, has improved visibly in the last two decades. The monthly academic journal *Violence Against Women* has made an important contribution to the understanding of the problem. In dealing with honour killing, however, recent Western social theory has played a rather negative role. We are talking about theories of cultural relativism, politics of identity, post-structuralism, postmodernism and other post-positions.

Since the late 1980s, this brand of thinking, now dominant in academe and fashionable in media and popular culture, treats *difference* as the main constituent of the social world. Human beings, in this construction of the world, are all different, with their diverse and particular "identities." There is little, if any, common bond between human beings. The politics and everyday life of human beings are shaped by identities which separate them from all other human beings. In this world of particularized individuals, cultures, peoples, or nations, patriarchy is not universal, and gender oppression is too particular to be the target of struggle of women and men even within a single country. At the same time, the concept of *difference* replaces the concept of *domination*. The world, in this view, is not divided into powerless and powerful blocs. Every individual, every woman,

wields power. Power is not hierarchically organized; there may be a "centre" and a "margin" of power but there are no relationships of domination and subordination.

This brand of theorization emphasizes respect for cultural difference. Although its advocates oppose violence, they prefer to remain silent about it, especially when it is perpetrated by "others" whom they cannot judge due to cultural differences. There is, thus, an attempt to isolate honour killing from the patriarchal culture of the society that generates it. This is done by, among other things, reducing honour killing to a "practice," i.e., an individual behaviour not rooted in patriarchy as a regime or system (see below). Labelling the crime as a "practice" relieves the academic specialist from the burden of criticizing culture and religion.

Some of these academics are feminists, who teach about gender relations in the Middle East. They try to avoid the neocolonialist or Orientalist trap of treating Middle Eastern women as backward, ignorant, illiterate, over-oppressed, and passive. This is surely a noble commitment, and a very honourable undertaking. However, in trying to distance themselves from "neocolonialist representations of Middle Eastern women," they tend to keep silent on the atrocities committed against women by "their own" men, "their own" religion, and "their own" culture. Let us provide an example. In a workshop on "Teaching about Honor Killings and other Sensitive Topics in Middle East Studies: 'Honor Killing,' 'Female Genital Mutilation or Circumcision,' 'Veiling,' and 'Women and Shari'ah,'" held at the University of California at Santa Barbara in March 2000, a number of academic feminists discussed their dilemma: how to speak about such "sensitive topics" without falling into the neocolonialist trap? One participant noted that she had pursued a policy of silence on female circumcision. A reviewer of the workshop reported:

She explained that her strategy for responding to questions about [female] circumcision had changed over time. First, her policy was silence. She would say, "I



don't have anything to say about this issue," or "I would rather talk about other issues, like poverty, neocolonialism, and so on... and their impact on women, rather than becoming part of the problem." But she said she realized that while she was choosing silence, others, who might not be well informed on the issue of circumcision, were taking over the discourse. She realized then that she had to respond. She added that often she encourages students not to write about circumcision until they know more about it, or until they talk at least to one woman who has been circumcised. But she expressed concern that this strategy might involve silencing her students. (Naber 2000: 20)

In her review of two documentaries on honour killing (*Crimes of Honour and Our Honour and His Glory*), feminist anthropologist Mary Elaine Hegland wrote:

The topic of honor killing, like clitoridectomy, spousal abuse, infanticide, elder neglect, rape, war, capital punishment, and pre-marital sex among other practices condoned by some groups but condemned by others, presents *dilemmas* to anthropologists, feminist scholars and others. Should anthropologists be apologists or advocates for their research group or social analysts? Should one's role be researcher or activist? (Hegland 2000:15; italics added)

One approach to the dilemma was to talk about the "sensitive topics" but to contextualize them by informing the students that these problems are not a Middle Eastern phenomenon; they are also found in the West, now and in the past. This pedagogical "strategy," according to some, will distance the instructor from neocolonialist "representations" or "discourses." The participants in the workshop decided to talk about "sensitive

topics" as a "strategy" to handle a dilemma (apologists/advocates or social analysts). This is a pedagogical device to protect the instructor from a perceived threat or a real (ideological and political) fear. We believe that it is indeed crucial to relate Middle Eastern male violence to its Western counterparts, though not for the reasons stated (i.e., not for the purpose of protecting the instructor from accusations of racism, Orientalism, etc.). Rather, violence against women in the West should be mentioned because patriarchy and male violence are universal. However, we argue that this "strategy" is not adequate. It does not allow a serious departure from neocolonialism. A radical departure requires the abandoning of the epistemological and theoretical dictates of agnosticism and cultural relativism. It requires the cultural relativist to overcome the fear of recognizing the universality of patriarchal violence. Taking this step, however, demands an appreciation of the dialectics of universals and particulars - each regime of patriarchy is particular (Kurdish patriarchy is different from Italian patriarchy), however, patriarchies form a universal regime in so far as they perpetrate, without exception, physical and symbolic violence against women (Mojab 1998).

In the (neo)colonialist world view, the women of the Middle East constitute an anomaly, an exception, or abnormality: unlike Western women, they are seen as blind followers of Islamic patriarchy. They are, according to neocolonialist thought, without their own history since they do not struggle for equality or liberation.

Academic feminists of the cultural relativist persuasion, too, fail to appreciate a century of Middle Eastern women's struggle against patriarchy. Women's struggle against patriarchy is, for them, another "sensitive topic." They may know about a century of women's press; a century of advocacy of women's rights; a century of writing; a century of poetry; a century of organizing; and a century of repression of women's movements by both secular and Islamic regimes. Yet talking about this history is "sensitive" because cultural relativists, like Islamic fundamentalists, believe that Middle Eastern women's movements are inspired by



Western women's struggles. Appreciating this history is difficult for these academic feminists because, in their opposition to neocolonialist "discourses," they often side with nationalists, Islamists and nativists. They privilege the nativist position, which rejects feminism as a "derivative discourse." They treat feminism as a "Western discourse" that is not compatible with Islam and the native culture. They do not want to contaminate Middle Eastern women's movements with the struggles of the women of the West, with modernity, with Enlightenment. Some secular academic "feminists" have actively contributed to the construction of a "Muslim woman identity."³

It is understandable, then, why academics in the cultural relativist position prefer silence about "sensitive topics"; and when they have to talk about honour killing, they reduce the institutionalized crime to a "practice" that has nothing to do with culture, Islam or the exercise of male power. This position does not start from the reality of male brutality against women. It legitimizes the violent gender politics of a tiny minority of the population, the self-appointed clergy. It imposes the politics of this tiny group on the entire nation; it authenticates this violent gender politics but delegitimizes a century of secular feminist movements in the Middle East. As a result, cultural relativists fail to condemn, without any reservation or condition, honour killing or stoning adulterers to death. They are concerned about being labelled "racist," "Orientalist," or "neocolonialist."

Anthropologists are equipped with conceptual tools for exempting culture and religion in the "practice" of honour killing. In her review of the two documentaries on honour killing, Hegland writes:

The two videos clearly differ in level of professionalism, cultural knowledge, and analytical sophistication. *Crimes of Honour* promotes a more balanced, contextualized, analytical treatment of honor killing and the film team and activists portrayed take a more moderate, accommodating stance. Since the action is

blamed on specific conditions rather than the society, culture, or tradition as a whole, the film provides hope that better conditions will serve to combat the practice.

Crimes of Honour is less strident in tone. Activists are angry about honor killing and the lack of effective means to protect threatened women, but they do not condemn culture, tradition, and religion as responsible... (p.16)

But why should any one who opposes honour killing "take a more moderate, accommodating stance" toward this crime and those who perpetrate it? What are "better conditions?" What "better conditions" can deter criminals from perpetrating the crime? Why should one hesitate to condemn the culture, tradition and religion that sanctions violence against women?⁴

Anthropologists interested in absolving religion and culture treat honour killing as a practice. "Practice theory" claims that individual behaviour (e.g., Rahmi's decision to kill Fadime) does not derive from rules, norms, culture, rule-bound traditions, systems or structures. Even when the existence of structures is not denied, they are not seen as constraining the mind or behaviour of the individual (Barnard 2000: 142-43). While practice theory has not made a major breakthrough in the debate on structure and agency, its application to the case of honour killing undermines feminist struggles against this crime.

PROSPECTS

We have tried to look at some of the systemic elements that allow for the production and reproduction of male violence, especially honour killing among the Kurds. We have argued that honour killing cannot be reduced to the psychological problems of individual killers. Honour-based violence is a social, patriarchal institution, which reproduces the supremacy of the male gender. In our time, a host of factors, ranging



from religion to public policy to media to academic theories, are playing a role in the perpetuation of honour killing.

We emphasize that education, and conscious, organized, intervention in oppressive gender relations will in the long run constrain the perpetration of this crime. We are talking about feminist intervention. However, feminist consciousness, feminist knowledge, and feminist culture themselves are under attack. In part because feminist knowledge has effectively challenged all previous knowledge systems as androcentric undertakings, it has been subjected to vilifications in Western media and popular culture and even within its own realm in academia (Hammer 2002). If non-Western nativists, Islamists and nationalists reject feminism as a "derivative discourse," conservatives in the West also refuse to include feminism in their "canon" of Western civilization and culture. This is where the Western colonialist, new and old, and the non-Western nationalist, nativist, Islamist, and cultural relativist inadvertently join forces. That also explains why the Holy See, Saudi Arabia and Iran joined forces in the Beijing Conference of 1995. Indeed, anti-feminism is probably stronger in the West than in the East. There is a hunger for feminist consciousness in non-Western societies. This is the case in spite of the fact that a host of theories ranging from post-modernism to identity politics to cultural relativism encourages the women of the world to go under the banner of their tribes, ethnic groups, nations, religions, and communities.

As for Kurdish women, they are a potentially powerful force in international women's movements. They constitute the hub of all contradictions in this globalizing world. Subjected to the brutal violence of the nation-states of the Middle East and their genocides and ethnic cleansing projects, suffering from the violence of "their own" national patriarchy, and dispersed throughout the world, Kurdish women are in a unique position to distance themselves from male-centred ethnic, nationalist, and religious politics, and to join forces with feminist movements which do not compromise with patriarchy. Women

and feminist movements are international in character; they are present all over the world and resist a worldwide regime of patriarchal oppression. However, they are not organized as an international movement. Kurdish women and Kurdish women's studies are at the margins of this international movement (Mojab 2001; Mojab and Hassanpour, forthcoming). There is considerable solidarity, although it is not readily accessible due to the organizational fragmentation of the movement.

The institution of the state in the countries that rule over the Kurds in the Middle East is neither civil nor civilized. One cannot expect an end to honour killing in a state which has no respect for any of its citizens' right to life, and freely exercises the "right to genocide." We believe that the struggle against honour killing is inseparable from the struggle for democratic rule. It is also a struggle for separation of state and religion; a struggle to deny the two Kurdish governments in Iraqi Kurdistan the right to impose a theocratic order on the Kurds. It is a struggle to push the two Kurdish governments to adopt and implement, without any reservations, the *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. CEDAW is an important document that Kurdish feminists can use to promote a democratic gender culture. Are these demands rooted in European Enlightenment? Our answer is, without hesitation, in the affirmative. Are these demands Western in origin? Definitely, yes. And there is nothing wrong with this. Peoples in the East have struggled for these demands for no less than a century. The demands are, thus, universal. We emphasize again that in the West, too, there was extensive opposition to these demands. Today, too, the extreme right and Christian fundamentalists, much like their Islamic counterparts, continue to oppose feminism and the separation of state and religion. The lines are, thus, not drawn on ethnic grounds but rather on political principles.

Western feminism has been justifiably critiqued for its ethnocentrism and racism. However, contrary to the claims of nationalists and nativists, there is a rich tradition of anti-racism in the West, especially in its feminist movements. Indeed, nowhere in the non-Western world can one



find a tradition of anti-racism that is as rich as that of the West. Kurdish women in the West are in an ideal position to draw on and contribute to these traditions of anti-racism and internationalism. In Kurdistan, women are subjected to the harshest forms of national and gender oppression. In its brutality, national oppression overshadows gender violence. However, Kurdish women have already made their own history by resisting their national patriarchy.

Tragically, Fadime will not be the last one in the long list of victims of male violence. More lives will be lost, often in obscurity, in Kurdistan and elsewhere. However, her life will not be lost in vain if we turn our anger and frustration into a struggle to challenge this brutality in all its manifestations and by all means possible.

ENDNOTES

1. A central story in the film is the chaining of a woman by her in-laws in their village barn on suspicion of infidelity. She is delivered to her husband when he returns to the village after taking a leave from prison. Many Turkish nationalists did not hesitate to condemn the film for offering a negative image of Turkey, and the film was banned by the government until 1993. In his review of the film, Roger Scruton celebrated the film for portraying "the Turkish army as a peace-keeping force imposing its rough justice upon a country torn by faction." However, the reviewer did not extend his defence of the Turkish army to women, whose right to life is denied in the movie and in Kurdish/Turkish society. Scruton resented Güneş's condemnation of violence against women by claiming that "he is unable to contain his outrage at the resulting sufferings of women, and unable to share Yasar Kemal's countervailing sense of the support which women receive, in the form of unbreakable domestic affection" (Scruton 1983). Honour killers have usually made no secret that they love their victims, and their decision to kill is, in large part, imposed on them by tradition, religion, and culture, as well as the approval and expectations of family, kin, tribe, neighbourhood, and village.

2. The leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran or the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan would be offended if they are told that their laws (in the case of Iran), *shari'a* (in the case of the Taliban) and *fatwas*, which have sanctioned honour killing and stoning adulterers to death, have nothing to do with Islam or are un-Islamic. Equally offended will be "some of the top scholars in the Muslim world" who have issued hundreds of misogynist Islamic Fatawa Regarding Women (Abdul-Aziz al-Musnad 1996). Many Islamic governments have not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the ones that have ratified it have entered significant reservations, which reject the Convention's requirement that all discrimination in marriage and family relations be eliminated. Some of these governments have justified their reservations by arguing that these articles of CEDAW are in conflict with *shari'a* (UNIFEM and UNICEF 1998; Banani 1998; Tay 1998; Nasser 1998). One may argue that these positions are based on particular readings of Islam; however, the claim that they are un-Islamic is a political and ideological position that does not promote the struggle against patriarchal gender relations.

4. An extensive and rich literature in all Middle Eastern languages since the late nineteenth century critiques the oppression of women, and unreservedly condemns violence against women. This literature includes journalistic essays, poetry, novels, short stories, cartoons, letters to the editor, satire, and academic research (see, among others, Afary 1996 and Afary et al 2000 on Iran; Brummett 2000 on Ottoman Empire; Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987, on contemporary Pakistan). Much like Enlightenment thinkers, reformers in the "Muslim world" critiqued the culture, tradition, and religion of oppression including the clergy and their versions of Islam. Today's feminists of a cultural relativist tendency move in the opposite direction by denying that Islam and culture play any role in honour killing, stoning adulterers to death, or executing gays and lesbians; not only do they deny such responsibilities, they do their best to protect Islam and Middle Eastern cultures from any critique. To give one example, another reviewer of *Crimes of Honour*, happily tells her readers, "This film also must be praised for making clear that honor killings have nothing to do with Islam..." and concludes, mournfully, that "this film will do nothing to endear viewers to Arab culture or to Islam. And this depiction constitutes the dilemma for teachers who might



want to use this film in their classroom. Indeed, once this Pandora's Box has been opened in the classroom, every other issue will pale into the background. Guaranteed" (Doumato 2000: 296-97).

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Untitled. Chapungu Sculpture Park, Harare, Zimbabwe, 1999.
Photo by Vanessa Farr.