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**“IN PURDAH, BUT EMPOWERED”:
MUKHTAR MAI’S *IN THE NAME OF HONOUR***

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Even though Islam has conferred rights on women making them equal to men but in both urban and tribal societies women find themselves as second class citizens, “A woman is nothing more than an object of exchange, from birth to marriage. According to customs, she has no rights”. (27-8)

The Pakistani society is uniformly and unconditionally patriarchal in which women are viewed as the property of men to whom they are related, women’s identity and honor lies in the hands of the male to whom she belongs, and her primary role is of a mother, wife and daughter. Her rights under the constitution and under Islamic law are denied to her legally, politically, socially and economically. Women’s lives are very hard, long working hours, denial of herself as a person, and an extremely subservient position and status within the home and within society. But sustained effort have not been undertaken to improve the lot of women and the state has failed to improve their conditions. Thus women’s contribution to the family, the community and to national development continues to go unrecognized.

In Pakistan, female sex is considered as an object. Whether she is educated or uneducated, treatment given to her is same. Rape cases of Dr. Shazia, Veena Hayat and Mukhtaran prove this. Dr. Shazia Khaled working in the Sui-Gas Company in Baluchistan was raped by an army captain and his friends on 7 January 2005. This led to bloody clashes between Baluch Nationalists and the Frontier Corps men. A large number of civilians and security men were killed in these clashes and Dr. Shazia faced death threats from government agencies. Veena Hayat, a political supporter of Ms. Bhutto was gang raped for hours by Karachi’s Central Investigation Agency men in her own house. The rape was organized by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan’s son-in law Irfanullah Marwat. Veena’s case relegated to the background because of the fallout of the confrontation between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharief and the President Ghulam Ishaq Khan. Mukhtaran Mai was gang raped and made to walk naked to her house in front of a large jeering and leering crowd. In June 2002, a Panchayat in village

Meerwala of Multan in Punjab ordered her gang rape to punish her 12 year old brother’s alleged love affair with a girl of higher caste. Educated women speak of their oppression but uneducated women are not allowed to speak about their problem.

General Zia’s regime introduced *Hudood or Ordinance of 1979*, which laid down their own special rules of evidence for hard offences. This new law provided that two male witnesses or in the absence of two male witnesses, one male and two female witnesses would be required to prove the crime. This law as well as other proposed legislations equated one man to two women. Again here, women were degraded. Hudood ordinances purportedly lay down Islamic punishment for certain crimes. These were barbaric punishments such as cutting of hands and stoning to death. Zina means adultery and fornication and *Zina-Bil-Jabr* means rape. This ordinance provided new weapon to men against women by virtue of making Zina cognizable offence for intimidation and terrorization of women by husbands or male relatives. Thus, these laws made women’s life even worse than a slave. According to Asma Jahangir, a distinguished Pakistani women lawyer and secretary of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan:

It has now become common for husbands to file complaints of Zina against wives wanting separation. Sadly, the eleven years of the so called policy of ‘Islamization’ under General Zia have produced in Pakistan a culture of intolerance. (Web)

This culture, above all, has persecuted women and subjected them to all kinds of humiliation and ill-treatment.

The story of Mukhtaran Mai’s journey from a poor illiterate village girl to the woman who was named as the “Woman of the Year” by an American magazine is narrated in her biography *In the Name of Honour*. It exposes the marginalization of women in Pakistani society and also enumerates the various inequalities that exist in that society

between the feudal land owners and the poor peasants, between the rich and poor, between the powerful and powerless. Mukhtar Mai's tragedy was that she was marginalized twice as she was poor, a peasant, uneducated and above all a woman. In such a society it is always the woman who pays twice over.

Mukhtar Mai, a thirty three years old Pakistani woman, belonged to Meerwala, a small village in Southern Punjab. Mukhtar Mai decided to write the book when she went through the horrible experience of gang rape. She showed that how she suffered at the hands of men and finally got up and gave them a tough fight: 'I may be poor and illiterate, and perhaps I've never stuck my nose into men's business, but I have ears to hear and eyes to see. Plus a voice to speak-and to speak up for myself!' (Mai 38)

The novel is about Mukhtar Mai and her brother Shakur, and how she was punished for the crime she had never committed. Her brother was accused of having illicit relation with Salma, a girl of Mastoi tribe, Mastois were the powerful ones, whereas Myukhtar Mai was a Gujjar, poor and illiterate woman. Caught in the caste conflict between the Mastoi and Gujjar clans, the woman is made to pay. In the tribal areas powerful ones are the leaders of jirga. Here the Mastois were powerful and the low caste people were forced to oblige them. Mukhtar Mai's father and Ghulam Nabi, a friend of another caste, Abdul Razzak and Ramzan Pachar accompanied her to the jirga where her whole life was destroyed. The rapists were Abdul Khaliq, Moh.d Faiz, Allah Ditta, Ghulam Farid and Faiz Mohammad. The book also tells that after the punishment she was forced by the village tribal customs to commit suicide and how she finally work up for survival and fought to get back her lost honour. She was helped by local media, NGO's and Human Rights Organization in her struggle against injustice. In an unprecedented act of courage, she took her rapists to court. In this rousing and moving account, Mai described her experiences and readers got a rare look inside a world of ancient tribal in justice, rampant illiteracy, poverty, economic and sexual bondage. Mukhtar Mai pitted herself against the system with extraordinary courage and strength of purpose and fought back from despair and utter hopelessness to emerge victorious:

The Mastois are old hands at this kind of retaliation. Their powerful clan leader knows many influential people, and they are violent men capable of invading anyone's home with their guns to loot, rape and tear the place apart. The lower-caste Gujars have no right to oppose them, and no one in my family had dared to go to their house. (5)

Mukhtar Mai's crime was that she was an illiterate woman from poor Gujjar background. In their areas, a woman is treated as nothing more than an object of exchange, from birth to marriage, she has no rights. It is a male dominated world where women exist on the margin. Men take decisions, lay down the laws, hand out punishment and women simply obey:

Whatever the pretext-divorce, supposed adultery, or a settling of accounts among men-women pay the heaviest price. They may be gives as compensation for an offence or raped as a form of reprisal by their husbands' enemies. Sometimes, all it takes is for two men to quarrel about something, and one of them will take revenge on the other's wife. The common practice in our villages is for man to take justice into their own hands invoking the principle of 'an eye for an eye'. It is always a question of honour, and they may do as they please: cut off a woman's nose, burn a sister, rape a neighbour's wife. (67)

It was because of her illiteracy that Mukhtar Mai had to pay for the crime that neither she nor her brother, Shakur had committed. It was because of her being submissive that she was punished before the entire village. She was gang-raped by Mastoi's to take revenge for her brother's supposed crime. Her younger brother was wrongly accused of having an affair with Salma, a girl of Mastoi family. Her crime was that she blindly followed her father and others to the jirga where she was required not as a human being but as an object on whom the Mastois could impose their vulgar decision.

There is much similarity in the stories of Bapsi Sidwah's *The Pakistani Bride* and Mukhtar Mai's *In the Name of Honour*. Sidwah's heroine Zaitoon's symbolic retaliation and her decision to run away are not at all signs of her militant feminism or deliberate defiance of the male order. Like Mukhtar Mai, all through, Zaitoon had been portrayed as a docile, affectionate and obedient child. Both Mukhtar and Zaitoon's heroic roles had thus been thrust upon them. This was the only way they could survive. It was a spiritual struggle, a lost ditch stand of the weak and the oppressed. That was why Mukhtar's victory was marvelous and inspiring. She had become a symbol of hope for all the oppressed and exploited women. From Mukhtar Bibi she became MukhtatanMai (respected elder sister) whose courage inspired other women to raise their voice. Dr. Shazia Khalid, a physician who worked for Pakistan Petroleum Limited was raped in her well guarded apartment when her husband was abroad. The rapist was apparently an army officer and the government tried to hush up the case. But Dr. Shazia was inspired by Mukhtar

Mai to raise her voice against the ghastly crime: "But I spoke up. Because I have a strong character? Because I was humiliated? Because my tongue was suddenly free to speak? from all of those reasons. But I'll make sure girls learn to read, I'll learn to read too. Never again will I sign a blank sheet of paper with my thumb print'. (77)

In a country like Pakistan where people still believe in old customs and traditions, lives of women has become hell. If a crime is committed by a man the punishment would be given to the woman. From each and every angle women become the victims of the cruel rules and regulations. A woman is regarded as a commodity which could be exchanged in anyway. Regarded as the honour the man, a woman becomes the primary target of the society in which she lives:

I don't condone 'crimes of honour'; far from it, but when foreigners hound me with questions, I try to explain to them how society works here in Punjab, a province where such crimes are unfortunately widespread. I was born in this country, subject to its laws, and I know that I am like all other women who belong to the men of their families: we are objects, and they have the right to do whatever they want with us. Submission is compulsory. (68)

In the male dominated society woman is a marginalized creature that could be dragged wherever and whenever they wish to exploit her. Men are the ones who believe that women must simply keep quiet and wait. Mukhtar Mai did not consider herself more than a goat. Like a meek and innocent goat she walked to the jirga without knowing that she would be finally slaughtered there. Her unknown punishment was already decided by the jirga before the arrival of Mukhtar, her father, her uncle Haji Altaf and Ghulam Nabi. It was Ramzan Pachar who, though supposed to be the negotiator between the two clans, was the real culprit. Ramzan Pachar suggested to the jirga that Mukhtar Mai be raped as her brother Shakur had done to Salma. It was an 'eye for an eye', rule that operated there.

It becomes clear from the intention of the Mastoi men that they wanted a Gujjar woman to be before the Mastoi jirga so that they could take revenge on her in front of the entire village. Those men had fooled the Mullah, her father, her entire family, and the councilors of the jirga and the councilors of the jirga and had themselves decided upon gang-rape as a means to revenge what they called the *honour crime*. It was at that time that Mukhtar Mai was punished for a crime she had never committed. She was gang-raped by the Mastoi men. As she was a woman from a poor Gujjar clan, nobody could come to her rescue till her whole life was

destroyed. This horrific experience not only killed her soul but also her bodily existence. She decided to commit suicide which was common among the victims of rape. But suddenly out of nowhere, a surprising fit of anger saved her from ending her life and finally she turned to seek revenge. She decided to fight back the powerful Mastois single handedly. The curse which was put upon her became a blessing in disguise. Her rape gave her strength to fight on behalf of the weak, meek and the oppressed women:

I myself am already different. I don't know how I am going to fight, but I want justice, and that will be my revenge. The direction of my new path, the only one possible, is clear in my mind. My honour, and that of my family, depend on it. Though it might cost me my life, I will not die humiliated. I have suffered for days, contemplated suicide, cried my heart out. I am changing, behaving differently, which I would never have thought possible.

When I begin this journey into the legal system, a path from which there is no turning back, I'm hampered by my illiteracy and my status as a woman. Aside from my family, I have only one strength to call upon: my outrage.

Before, I have lived in absolute submission; now, my rebellion will be equally relentless. (29-30)

Mukhtar Mai's *In the Name of Honour* is actually a story of woman's transformation from weak to a powerful one. It is a journey from ignorance to knowledge, from a woman without rights of a woman to a woman with all privileges and rights of an educated woman. Mukhtar Mai had become a hero because she was the only one who dared to speak up about her horrific experiences to the world outside which was totally new to her. The news of the horrific rape of June 22, 2002 started spreading like a wild fire throughout the region. Mai felt guilty of having been raped and that was a cruel feeling because what happened to her a few days ago was not any of her fault. But the rapists did not feel guilty at all. Mukhtar Mai said:

I, Mukhtaran Bibi eldest daughter of father, Ghulam Farid Jat, lose all consciousness of myself, but I will never forget the faces of those animals. For them, a woman is simply an object of possession, honour, or revenge. They marry or rape them according to their conception of tribal pride. They know that a woman humiliated in that way has no other recourse except suicide. They do not even need to use their weapons. Rape kills her. Rape is the ultimate weapon; it shames the other clan forever. (11)

She decided to fight back and in the beginning she filed a case against her rapists. It was a courageous action especially for a woman to take such a bold step. By nature Mai was stubborn and it was that stubbornness with which she could get a divorce from her husband who was good for nothing. She divorced her husband because he was not capable of playing his role as a responsible husband. He could not offer her security which a woman needed from her husband after her marriage. It was with this stubbornness that she got victory over her enemies. Of course her father always stood by her side, but how many women are lucky enough to have support of their families in each and every matter. How many are blessed with this sense of stubbornness? Mukhtar Mai said:

Luckily, my father is here. He protects us the way he always has, unlike certain fathers, who would not hesitate to sacrifice their son or daughter to protect themselves from trouble. After he realized that the man chosen to be my husband was a disreputable lout who didn't keep his promises, my father supported me in my divorce. I regained my freedom thanks to my father and my stubbornness, the only weapon we women have against men". (41)

Throughout her struggle she had only one thing in her mind that how could she get justice for herself. Soon she realized that the cause of her popularity was that she stood for all the other women in her part of the country who had been violated. For the first time, an illiterate woman had become a symbol of women empowerment. The fight which Mukhtar Mai had started was not an easy task to win over. No doubt, she faced number of problems in the way of her success. But she never thought of giving up her mission because now she wanted to take charge of her life into her own hands. She was supported not only by her family but got support from all over the world. Encouragement from N.G.O's, Human Rights Commission and to some extent from the government really made her brave and strong.

She was taken to the district judge who after listening to her story encouraged her for her courage and valour. Mukhtar and her brother Shakur were taken to the Muzaffar Garh hospital for medical examination, where lady doctor confirmed Mai had been raped. But no one could evaluate the private wounds of humiliation. Shakur was also tortured and sexually assaulted. Mukhtar found a comrade in Naseem who was a vivacious, articulated and clear headed woman. She was not afraid to speak her mind and she encouraged Mukhtar Mai to be strong: "You're afraid of everyone and everything. If you keep on that way,

you'll never make it. You have to take things into your own hands." (83)

It was Naseem who taught her the importance of female bonding and how two women can share their joys and sorrows and learn to fight oppression together:

You're like a baby', she tells me. 'A baby learning how to walk. It's a new life: you have to start over at zero. I'm not a psychiatrist, but tell me about your life before, your childhood, your marriage, and even what they did to you. You must talk, Mukhtar, and it's by talking that you bring the good and evil out in the open. You free yourself. It's like washing dirty clothing; when it's all clean again, you can wear it with confidence once more. (85)

In Pakistan, it is difficult for a woman, either educated or not, to prove that she has been raped, since she is legally required to provide four male eyewitnesses to the crime. This is ensuring that the law and chiefly the punishment for a rape not misused. It was unfortunate on the part of Mukhtar Mai and Shakur because the rapists were themselves eyewitnesses to the crime:

Whether he's peasant or a soldier, a man rapes as he pleases whenever he wants. He knows that most of the times he'll be spared, protected by a whole system-political, tribal, religious, or military. We women are not even close to enjoying our legitimate rights. On the contrary! Feminists are not respected: people take us for dangerous revolutionaries at worst, and at best for troublemakers in a man's world. You? They reproach you for turning to feminist- some papers even say that you're being manipulated by reporters and the NGO's. As though you weren't intelligent enough to understand that the only way to obtain justice is to demand it, loud and long! (127)

Demonstrations were held. Human Rights group demanded justice and criticized the local police for taking too long to register her case. But destiny had something good for her though she got that after going through a gruelling experience. As an illiterate woman, she knew after a long time the importance of education, especially for women. That's why she demanded help to build a school in her village Meerwala. A lady Minister who came to Mai handed over a cheque worth million to her. Mai very politely said that she did not want a cheque but a school for girls instead. Actually Mukhtar wanted to make girls equal to menfolk. She wanted girls to be educated so that they could fight for their rights themselves. She did not want them to be marginalized as she herself was. She

decided to set up a school because she realized it was the only way to empower women. By the end of 2005, the school with Naseem as headmistress had one hundred sixty boys and two hundred girls. She had to convince parents to let girls come to school instead of making them to do housework:

And every day, I hear the girls reciting their lessons, running, laughing, chatting on the playground. All those voices comfort me nourishing my hopes. My life now has some meaning. This school ought to exist, and I will keep fighting for it. In a few years, I hope, these little girls will have enough ideas about education to consider their lives in a new light. Because ever since the dreadful attack that sent the name of my village all around the world, similar horrors against women have not ceased. Every hour in Pakistan, a woman is assaulted, beaten, burned with acid, or killed in the 'accidental' explosion of a cooking-gas canister. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recorded 160 cases of rape during the last six months in Punjab alone. And I regularly receive visits from women who come to me for help. Naseem tells them to seek assistance from women's aid associations and gives them legal advice, recommending, for example, that they never sign a deposition without an eye witness. (118)

Pakistan's Minister for justice had stated on British television that the verdict of the jirga, led by Mastoi tribe, should be considered as an act of terrorism; that the tribal assembly itself was an illegal body, and the guilty should be punished before an anti-terrorism court. The affair was an abuse of power, he said. Mukhtar Mai's case had become an affair of the state and she a national

heroine. not only had the Mastois bribed police but the government of Pakistan also tried to suppress Mukhtar and her struggle against injustice. But with her will and determination, Mukhtar Mai broke the stereotype of the 'Bechari' image of a woman.

On Friday, July 31, 2002, the anti-terrorism court delivered its verdict during a special session outside the court hours. Six men were condemned to death and ordered to pay fifty thousand rupees in damages and the cost of the defendants for the rape of Mai. Through her struggle, Mai learnt how to deal with men and how to fight for her lost honour. She got worldwide publicity for her feminist activities and her biography is aptly titled *In the Name of Honour* because it was the fake primitive jirga honour which Mukhtar challenged and replaced it with the real honour of womanhood.

Mukhtar Mai deconstructed the metaphor of purdah which placed women in seclusion from the male world and treated them as passive creatures who obeyed men. Women were seen as victims who could do nothing to prevent their exploitation and oppression by men. Mukhtar Mai challenged the "bechari syndrome" by her determination to seek justice for herself and her family. As a victim of gang-rape sanctioned by the village jirga, she did not commit suicide as most women were expected to do, but fought back to regain her honour. A woman who was raped for so-called honour proved what real honour is and how all women have the right to live with dignity and honour. She believed that education is a magic lamp that liberates women from centuries of oppression and empowers them to take charge of their own lives.

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