
Echoes of Injustice: Suffering, Memory, and Survival in Souad's Memoir on Honour Killing

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of Souad's memoir, *Burned Alive*, examining the profound psychological impact of honour killing and cultural injustice. Souad's narrative provides a powerful testimony against this critical global human rights abuse, which remains rooted in patriarchal violence and cultural norms. The memoir serves as a profound document of how the catastrophic event, the attempted murder became a permanent, traumatic memory, shaping the author's subsequent life through suffering and the arduous process of survival. Moving beyond a purely sociological understanding, this study employs Trauma Theory and Psychoanalytical Theory to investigate the emotional and psychic landscape of the narrator, exploring the struggle to forge an identity outside of a system that sanctioned her death. By sharing Souad's story, we aim to raise awareness about the devastating consequences of honour crimes and the importance of listening to survivors' voices. We will examine how Souad's courage and resilience can inspire change and challenge the systems that enable such violence.

This paper is a tribute to Souad's strength and a call to action to create a world where no one has to suffer in silence. Through Souad's story, we hope to spark a conversation about justice, compassion, and support for survivors of honour crimes. Ultimately, this paper argues that Souad's narrative reclaims agency through textualization, transforming personal suffering into a public act of witnessing and challenging the destructive cultural scripts that sanction violence in the name of "honour."

Key Words: Honour Killing, Trauma, Memory, Suffering, Memoir, Violence, and Injustice

Introduction**Honour Killings:**

Honour killings are acts of violence, usually murder, committed by male family members against female family members who are perceived to have brought dishonour upon the family. This, however, is not denying the fact that men can also be the victims of honour killing. In respect of men, it can be committed by the family of women with whom they are perceived to have an inappropriate relationship. In other words, we can say that honour killing is killing of women/men by members (especially family members) for honour.

It is well known that honour killing is an umbrella term that comprises different kinds of atrocities, brutalities, barbarism and above all murders of an innocent just for the sake of illusive/false honour. Honour killing does not only signify killing/murder of someone just for the sake of honour but it also signifies ‘murder of freedom of choice’, ‘murder of identity and existence by neglecting someone’s life’, ‘murder of voice by suppressing someone’s voice’ and finally ‘murder of witness’ and ‘taking revenge’ also come under this category. For example, when we read *Pinjar* by Amrita Pritam through this lens, we realize that Puro’s abduction by Rashid was not a random act but the outcome of ancestral revenge. Rashid himself was compelled by his family, who believed that seizing Puro was the only way to restore their lost honour. This exchange perfectly highlights the cruelty of a patriarchal society where women are treated as commodities rather than human beings with their own agency. As the novel progresses, we see that Puro somehow manages to escape from Rashid’s clutches. When she returns to her parents’ house, her family refuses to take her back simply because she spent ten days in Rashid’s house. To her parents, Puro died the very day she was kidnapped. Her identity and existence within her own home were obliterated by her own parents either for the appeasement of their society or for the survival of the family from the hidden threat of exclusion by the same society. The attempt of the family to sacrifice the individual for the sake of the family is a recurring tragedy in our society. This punishment is given to the individual with a painful heart as they need to remain in harmony with the given social system and cultural norms of the society.

There are several examples of honour killing as we perceive it today, in classic literature. Apart from the famous example of Romeo and Juliet, the tragic end of Desdemona, the central female protagonist of *Othello* can also be examined as a case of honour killing. By looking at her tragic end, we can see how the central female protagonist becomes a victim of a system that prioritises “honour” over human life.

In our surroundings, we observe that several kinds of complications have emerged in our society. The human desire to live happily and peacefully has perhaps given birth to several social institutions. One of the most reliable and universally accepted institutions is the family. Individuals feel themselves to be very safe within the structure of family. The subjective thought process and mere perception of the male members of a society that a

particular act by a female member has caused irreparable harm to the family's image is sufficient cause to trigger the execution of an act that is termed as honour killing. The main reason for committing an offence of honour killing is to remove the stigma that has been attached to the entire family. These acts are considered entirely unacceptable and emotionally unbearable because they destroy the family's established image and social standing within their community. The perpetrators, along with their relatives and neighbours, care mainly about their family's reputation and standing in the community. They are extremely focused on keeping a good public image. This is why they choose to commit honour killings, believing that killing the person who caused the shame is the only way to quickly fix and protect their family's reputation in the community. This prioritisation of social image over human life reveals a brutal system where patriarchal control tragically justifies murder in the name of preserving an outdated code of honour. The violence is not only a response to perceived disobedience but also an extreme public display intended to warn others and solidify the family's authority. At the end, this killing is driven by deep fear, the fear of being excluded or disrespected by their community. It tragically shows how rigidly enforced community rules can completely ignore basic human rights and morality. The purpose of this study is to:

- I. Critically analyse the cultural, and social mechanisms that perpetuate the practice of honour killing, particularly how it is justified through misinterpretations of "honour" and patriarchal control over men/women's autonomy.
- II. Analytical study of *Burned Alive* by Souad, a Palestinian writer who dared to give voice to her own sufferings.
- III. Generate empathy and moral outrage among the reader through the detailed description of the tragic events that took place in the life of Souad.

Memoir: - A memoir is any nonfiction narrative writing based on the author's personal memories. The word memoir is originally derived from the French word 'mémoire' meaning 'reminiscence' or 'memory.' In Latin, it is written as 'memoria', which also means memory or remembrance. A memoir has historically been defined as a subcategory of biography or autobiography. A memoir as a genre is differentiated in form since the late 20th century, presenting a narrowed focus, usually a particular time phase in someone's life or career. A biography or autobiography tells the story "Of a life", while a memoir often tells the story of a particular career, event, or time, such as touchstone moments and turning points in the author's life. The authors of memoirs often choose a pivotal moment in their lives and try to recreate the event through storytelling. The author's feelings and assumptions are central to the narratives. Memoirs still include all the facts of the event, but the author has flexibility here because she/he is telling a story as she/he remembers it, not as others can prove or disprove it.

Thus, it can be said that a memoir is a non-fiction narrative written from the author's own memory, focusing on a specific period, event, or theme in their life, rather than the comprehensive and chronological account found in a full autobiography. It recounts the

author's personal experiences, distinguishing itself from an autobiography by concentrating on a slice of life, a specific time, and significant event rather than the entire life story.

Review of Published Literature:

Dr. Alka Bhatia remarks in an article, "Honour Killing- A Study of the Causes and Remedies in its Socio Legal Aspect" that the basic cause of this social menace is the tradition of caste and control over a women's body and the patriarchal mind set. Because of this in most of the cases the honour killing is done by girls' families. The notion of the father as dictator with an iron-fisted grip on the lives of his children, especially his daughters, regrettably persist in many countries around the world. And, the father believes that if his children stray, especially in sexual matters, the father is entitled to punish them even unto death. This barbarism carries the name Honour Killing (Bhatia 7).

Shruthi K Bekal observes in "Honour Killing in India: An Unhonoured Crime" that the term "honour killing" is defined as, an act amounting to murder or homicide, which is committed upon one of the members of the family, which brought shame or dishonour to the family, through her act of going against the will or wish of family. . . . Women are treated as a commodity and animals in the society, and are not allowed to make their own decisions and they do not possess any power of living freely and with personal liberty in the society (Bekal 714,719).

Dr. Saraswati Raju Iyer says in "Honour Killing-Crime against Mankind" that honour killing is unjust and inhumane action. It is a crime against mankind. "Honour" killings of women (and occasionally their male partners in crime) reflect longstanding patriarchal-tribal tradition Patriarchal tradition casts male as the sole protector of the female so he must have total control over her The typical "honour" killer is a man, usually the father, husband, or brother of the victim (Iyer 1,3).

Research Questions:

- I. How does Souad's memoir represent the trauma of honour killing, and the interplay of suffering, memory, and survival?"
- II. How does Souad use personal memory to reconstruct the trauma of honour killing in her memoir?
- III. What cultural norms and structures perpetuate honour killings, and how are they challenged in Soud's narrative?
- IV. How does the memoir contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of honour killings on individuals and communities?

Research Gap:

There is no denying the fact that critics and commentators have discussed honour killing in a holistic and comprehensive way across various genres of literature and social studies. Much of the existing scholarship has focused on sociological analyses, legal frameworks, feminist theory, and cultural studies. However, this study deliberately situates itself in the field of memoir, a genre that has often been overlooked in honour killing

discourse. Souad's *Burned Alive* is not merely a record of violence; it is a voice that bridges the private wound with public advocacy. Therefore, this study is essential because it underscores how memoirs of honour killing function not only as testimonies of pain but also as instruments of cultural diplomacy. This research paper contributes to a deeper understanding of honour killing as both a crime against humanity and a narrative of resilience that demands recognition in literary scholarship.

Discussion: Textual Analysis

The Scars of 'Love': Unmasking Betrayal and the Body's Testimony of Honour Killing

Burned Alive is a powerful and haunting memoir by Souad, a Palestinian woman who survived an attempted honour killing by her own family in the West Bank. The book recounts her harrowing experience, from falling in love at 17 to the brutal attack that left her severely burned and scarred. The book begins with very horrifying lines that compels the reader to think about the societies, communities, and villages where these types of practices are very prevalent. She considered her life as a girl in her village as a curse. She never played like a child and never had childlike fun. And all this she observes while writing the memoir far away from her country and far away from her childhood. When she looks back for a glimpse of her childhood in the village, she realises with a shock that there are no such memories to find. Marriage was the only way to freedom for girls in her situation. The girl who left her father's house in search of an illusionary freedom that too with warning that she is never going to return to her father's house even if the situation is harsh or not in her favour in her husband's house.

The condition of Souad's village was worse than worst where women's purity always determined the family's honour. Souad paints a stark picture of life in her village, where traditional, rigid gender roles dictate that women are seen as mere possessions, objects and commodities. They possess few rights, live in constant fear of male authority, and are expected to display absolute obedience and chastity. The concept of family honour is paramount, and it rests entirely on the sexual purity of the women. At the age of 17 or 18, Souad fell in love, but in her village, sex before marriage was a grave dishonour, punishable by death. Unfortunately, she became pregnant and her family discovered her secret. This act is considered a catastrophic source of dishonour for her family. Her family holds a council and passes a death sentence upon her, believing that only her murder can restore the family's lost honour. She says:

"It is the duty of the brother, the brother-in-law or the uncle to preserve the family's honour. If the father or mother says to her son, your sister has sinned, you must kill her, he does it for the sake of honour and because it is the law." (Souad 48)

Her brother-in-law, Hussein was assigned the task of carrying out the murder. One morning, as Souad was doing the laundry, Hussein pours gasoline over her and sets her on fire. In the community's eyes, this makes him a 'hero' for upholding the "law of men," and the crime of honour killing is generally unpunished by local authorities. Souad further observes:

“I never saw the police. It is nothing if a woman disappears. And the village people agree with the men’s law: if you don’t kill a girl who has dishonoured her family, villagers will reject the family, and nobody will speak to them or do business with them. They have to leave.” (Souad 50)

Miraculously, Souad survives, rescued by village women who put out the flames and take her to a local hospital. However, she’s abandoned by her family and community, left to face the physical and emotional trauma alone. Crucially, her family members continue to watch her, determined to see her die and even attempting to obstruct her treatment or smother her to finish the job and eliminate the family’s shame. Her life is saved by a humanitarian worker named Jacqueline, who worked for the Swiss NGO Terre des Hommes. Jacqueline recognises the attempt on Souad’s life. She secures Souad’s transfer to a specialised hospital in Europe, saving her from certain death. The care and support of Jacqueline enabled Souad to start a new life somewhere in Europe. At the end she says”

“Today I still think about that. It is true that I would have preferred to die rather than face the second life they were so generously offering me. But to have survived is a miracle. It allows me now to bear witness in the name of all those women who have not had this opportunity, and who keep dying for one reason: that they are women.... Now I see things very differently because I ‘died’ in my village and was reborn in Europe.” (Souad 17, 51)

Theoretical Interpretations

Souad’s memoir reveals one of the most harrowing events of her life. It does not simply recount an honour killing. It exposes the reality of a society where women live under constant trauma, carrying memories of brutal practices that disturb them psychologically and emotionally. The fear of such violence compels women to lead lives of suppression and silence. They cannot think, speak, walk, play, or enjoy freely. Instead, they are merely treated as commodities. Souad herself became the victim of this heinous crime. Burned by her brother-in-law, Hussein and nearly murdered by her own mother in hospital. She carries permanent scars on her body and in her memory. Just as the marks on her skin remain visible, the memory of this event remains embedded within her, shaping her identity and limiting her freedom. Even in Europe, she continues to live behind a mask, unable to disclose her location or move freely. This inability reveals to the readers how deeply trauma has weakened her psychologically. Cathy Caruth’s concept of “belatedness” illuminates Souad’s experience. Caruth explains that trauma is not simply an event possessed by the victim; rather, the event possesses the victim through its repetitive return. Souad’s memoir demonstrates this echo: her scars, her silence, and her inability to move freely are all signs of trauma’s return, showing how the past continues to shape her present. Michel Foucault in his seminal work, *Discipline and Punish* introduces the concept of the "Panopticon", a metaphorical prison structure where inmates are placed in cells around a central tower. Because the inmates never know exactly when they are being watched, they begin to police their own behaviour at all times. In Souad’s society, patriarchal "honour" functions as a social panopticon. Even when

a male guardian is not physically present, the internalised "gaze" of her family and community forces her to regulate her every move. This creates what Foucault calls a "docile body", a body that is manipulated, shaped, and trained to obey without the need for constant physical force. Souad's memoir illustrates that even after moving to Europe, she remains a "docile body." Her refusal to remove her mask or reveal her location demonstrates that the Panopticon has been moved from her village to her mind; she continues to act as her own jailer out of fear of a "gaze" that is now thousands of miles away.

Conclusion

Souad exposes the brutal reality of honour killings through her memoir. She seeks to break the silence by sharing her story, inspiring change and encouraging other women to speak out. *Burned Alive* stands as a testament to her courage and resilience, reminding us of the devastating consequences of cultural and societal expectations. Souad's narrative urges society to come together to create a world where women are valued, respected, and free from fear of violence or harm.

Honour killing is deeply rooted in discrimination and patriarchal violence, shaped by the perceptions of men who view women as objects rather than individuals entitled to equal rights. In *Burned Alive*, Souad's harrowing account of survival and endurance highlights the lasting impact of such crimes on both individuals and communities. Her story confronts readers with the stark reality of a practice that reduces women to vessels of family honour, silencing their voices and erasing their agency. Bearing witness to Souad's suffering compels us to acknowledge the echoes of injustice that reverberate across generations.

Souad's memoir is more than a personal testimony; it is a powerful indictment of the systems that perpetuate violence and impunity. Her bravery in telling her story becomes a rallying cry for change, urging society to dismantle the structures that enable honour killings and to build a future where women can live with dignity and security. By the conclusion of her memoir, readers are left with a profound sense of responsibility: to listen, to amplify survivors' voices, and to work tirelessly toward justice and compassion for all.

The connection between perpetrators' pride in committing such crimes and the failure of authorities to act only fuels further injustice against women. This miscarriage of justice must be confronted through the strict implementation of national and international policies designed to curb the rising tide of honour-based violence. Only through such measures can we hope to control and ultimately eradicate these crimes from society.

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