

Symbolic Representation of Daughter in Sindhi Culture

Mohammad Sajjad Abro

Management and Development Center, Hyderabad

Abstract

The paper analyzes symbolic representation of a daughter as a Niyani (goddess) and Satt Qur'an (seven Qur'ans), and associates it with her sexuality. It is argued that these symbols are a means of control to protect virginity and regulate sexuality of women.

Key words

Daughter, Sacred, Virginity, Sexuality, Honor

Introduction

The current paper offers analysis of symbolic representation of woman as a daughter in a Sindhi culture. The study was conducted in 20 villages of six districts (two from north, south and the center each) and the data was collected through informal discussions, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with men, women, boys and girls of the village. These symbolic representations are common to all Muslim Sindhis and findings can be generalized to the entire Sindhi speaking Muslim population of Sindh province of Pakistan.

Daughter in Muslim Sindhi culture is associated with seven Qur'ans. This sacred symbol represents her sanctity, innocence and purity. She is also associated with the honor of the family. I argue that such symbols or symbolic representations of the daughter do not elevate her social status, but on the contrary these are the means of control to regulate her sexuality. It is not just the physical strength or control over means of production that make men powerful or dominant. It is mainly the use of symbols that have been so naturalized that men and women take them as real and as determinants of the gender roles in their society. Hence, instead of studying biological characteristics of sexes or economic means of production, the current study presents analysis of symbols used for woman as a daughter.

Research Framework

I here briefly describe how I develop my theoretical framework. Humans are symbolic animals (Cassirer, 1972) and live in a universe created symbolically with webs of significance (Geertz, 1973). Compared to men, symbolic representation of women occupies a prominent position in such a universe, whereby women, in various cultures around the globe, are at times revered as goddesses, harbingers of fortune and luck, and sometimes hated and feared as witches and sorcerers. Whatever the representation of women, they have never attained a position equal to

that of men (Goldberg, 1973). Matriarchy, if defined as a mirror image of patriarchy, is a myth and anthropologists have yet to find it (Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). In the list of "Human Universals" by Anthropologist Donald Brown men occupy the dominant position in public political affairs (Brown, 1991). Even the sacred status given to women as a goddess does not elevate her social status to that of men (Eller, 2001). Her association with "nature" (Ortner, 1972) and "chaos" (Bamberger, 1974) is merely a charter for women to relegate them to a secondary status. Matriarchies abound in myths around the world, but there is no society which could be called "true matriarchal people" (Vonier, 2007). Patriarchy has evolutionary origins whereby men coerce women to control their sexuality (Smuts, 1995). War and violence are manifestations of male supremacy, everywhere in the world, in past as well as in present, warfare has been job of men (Harris, 1977). Recent archaeological findings also suggest male aggression in the form of violence which was very common in neolithic era and, though it was mostly all-male game, but it was also used against women (Fibiger, Ahlström, Bennike, & Schulting, 2013). Women were also the victims of interpersonal violence in prehistoric Indus Civilization (Fibiger, Ahlström, Bennike, & Schulting, 2013). Even if gender roles are defined with reference to adaptations to economic and technological arrangements, it is men who control sources of production and wield social power (Martin & Voorhis, 1975). Such an imbalance in gender roles has been so widespread and has been taken for granted that men rarely have to show their physical strength to overpower women. From the very beginning, boys and girls are socialized into sex-specific roles and the roles are further symbolically reinforced through folktales, rituals and myths.

The current article describes woman's, especially daughter's, status in Sindhi society where she is associated with the sacred book Qur'an and honor of

the family to keep her virginity intact and control her sexuality.

I draw on works of Firth and Cohn who define symbols with relationship to action and control. For Cohn, symbols are 'objects, acts, concepts, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions, and impel men to action, (Cohn, 1974)' whereas Firth sees symbols as 'instruments of expression, of communication, of knowledge and of control' (Firth, 1973). Adopting their definitions, I propose that daughter's association with Qur'an is a means to control women's sexuality. To paraphrase Turner, "men master women by symbols," and Qur'an is the symbol through which men in Sindh master women.

In the following paragraphs, I draw parallels between Qur'an and the Daughter and then show how this symbol is associated with female sexuality.

Qur'an/Daughter as Sacred

A daughter, in Sindhi culture, is called Niyani, which has origins in Hindu religion and literally means goddess (Babb, 1984). Though Muslims do not believe in goddesses, as it has pre-Islamic origins, the term Niyani is still used by Sindhi Muslims but, due to Islamic influence, it has now been equated with Satt Qur'an (Seven Qur'ans). Qur'an is the most sacred book for Muslims and daughter's association with seven Qur'ans shows more sacredness of the daughter and reverence people hold towards her. Compared to daughters, sons are not associated with sacred entity. It's a common joke in Sindh that "daughter is seven Qur'ans, but the son is not even a single verse or a chapter of Qur'an."

Of all the roles of a woman, her role as a daughter remains more sacred. When men fight each other or quarrel, they often hurl verbal abuses against each other. These abuses usually target men's wife, sister or even mother, but never a daughter. Even in normal situations, men can tolerate jokes on wife, sister and mother, but not on daughters. One would hardly find any abusive joke on daughters.

Protection of Qur'an/daughter

Qur'an is always covered in clothes. If it is kept uncovered, it may cause harm to the family. Though holy and powerful, Qur'an also needs to be protected from evil by covering it with clothes.

Suppose I open Qur'an to recite it. But if, for a while, my attention gets diverted or I have to leave for even a brief moment, I will not leave Qur'an open. I must close it and cover it. Evil Spirits might read the Qur'an if it is left open.

Sodho, 61

Cloth attached to the holy book is also considered sacred, and usually, once attached to Qur'an, it is never detached from it. People may wrap Qur'an with more pieces of clothes, but previous pieces are never removed. Similarly, a daughter's head is covered with a poati (thin chaadar). The poati has a symbolic significance among the people. Removing poati from the head of the daughter would be tantamount to dishonoring her and her family. This would evoke strong sentiments among her brothers and parents and one who removes the poati, has to face serious consequences. Like Qur'an, daughter also needs to be protected from those who might dishonor her by removing her poati. As Qur'an should not be kept uncovered so that everyone could see it with naked eyes, the Daughter should also be kept covered so that no outsider could see her.

The symbol of poati is also used for political purposes. An elderly man recounted an old story related Benazir Bhutto, late ex-prime minister of Pakistan, who was respected by people as the Daughter of Sindh.

During her last election campaign, she said, "the flag of my party is not a flag. It is a poati. I am your daughter, and you have to honor me." So, we voted her in general elections. It is not her flag, nor she herself, but it's the poati that we respected. We can't disrespect our daughter.

If a man wants to make a woman her sister, he simply puts a poati on her head. This means she will remain her sister forever, and he will have to respect the relationship as if she were her blood sister.

In rare cases, when an unrelated man is found to make some advances towards a daughter, her parents may call for a faislo (literally means decision, but it refers to the council of elders led by the head of the tribe who make political decisions or resolve inter-village or inter-tribal conflicts). The parents request the tribal head to prevent that man from making such advances, as by doing so he is dishonoring the family. Even if the accused denies such allegations, he is forced to place poati on the head of the girl so that from now onwards, he considers her as his daughter. This way, the family ensures the man and the girl do not engage in a love affair or a sexual relationship.

Swearing by Qur'an/Daughter

Whenever a Sindhi Muslim wants others to believe in what s/he says, s/he swears by Qur'an. Though swearing by god is also common, but here the focus is on swearing by Qur'an to express its relationship with swearing by daughter. Even during the faislo, the

accused is asked to swear by Qur'an before providing explanations to defend himself. If he places his hand on Qur'an, and provides explanation, be it false, everyone has to believe in what he says. He is exonerated of the accusation.

Once Khameeso of the neighboring village broke into my house and stole jewelry of my wife. I could not catch him, but I did recognize it was Khameeso. I went to our sardar (tribal head) and called for faislo. During faislo, Khameeso put Qur'an on his head and said he didn't steal our jewelry. Though I knew he was lying, but I didn't say anything to him because he swore by Qur'an.

Lutuf, 60

Similarly, if a man swears by his daughter, this would be considered equal to swearing by Qur'an. But daughter must be his own. Because if he lies after swearing by his daughter, false swearing will cause harm to his daughter which may make her sick or end her life. That's why one is not allowed to swear by daughter of another parent.

Curse of Qur'an/daughter

Curse of Qur'an and daughter is always avoided by the people. If one does not respect Qur'an, the later may harm him or her. Torn pages of Qur'an, if found on earth or anywhere which is not a suitable place for it, one is required to pick the pages and place them in a safe corner. If he walks over the pages, he may fall sick. A daughter's curse is also avoided by adults. Her curse is believed to shake 'seven heavens' and receive immediate response from the god. Though men try to avoid her curse by not doing any harm to her, mothers forbid daughters from cursing anyone because her curse will bring immediate misfortune to that person.

A father can, and often does, physically punish his sons for any misdeeds, but he will not hit his daughter. Father and mother tend to be lenient towards daughters even they commit the same mistake as done by sons. The same also holds true in schools where the teachers treat boys and girls differently. An eight year girl student said, "Our teacher severely punished boys. Sometimes boys get almost unconscious. But he never hits girls. Even if we do not memorize our lesson, he simply reproaches us."

Conflict resolution

Conflicts between two families or two tribes often occur. In case one party is weak and cannot continue the conflict by taking revenge or fears more violent counterattack, it may go to the other party, with Qur'an in hand, to end the conflict and get

forgiveness. This process of taking Qur'an to end conflict and seek forgiveness is called Qur'an Mairh. Going to the otaq (the gathering place for men) of the other party symbolizes surrender, whereas taking Qur'an means the party wants forgiveness. When the head of the other party sees Qur'an, his immediate reaction is to take Qur'an, cover it with a piece of cloth and place it at an elevated place. He is then expected to end the conflict and forgive them.

The process in which daughter is taken to the other party to for the same purpose, i.e. to end conflict and seek forgiveness, is called Niyani Mairh (Shah, 1912). The head of the other party is required to stand up in honor of the daughter, cover her head with poati, and offer a cot to sit on. He ends the conflict and forgives them. But what if he does not forgive them? A head of a village explains:

He has to forgive them. If he does not, it means he does not respect Qur'an or the daughter. And nobody will like this. He will commit a blasphemy. He will be cursed forever by Qur'an or the daughter. Moreover, this will also create bad image of him among his villagers. People do not like the person who disrespects Qur'an or the daughter.

Qur'an/Daughter as a blessing

A house without a Qur'an is said to be devoid of blessings. Even the poorest family in the community has a Qur'an in its house. "Angels of fortune won't come to your house, if you do not have a Qur'an," told a woman respondent. Similarly, daughter is considered a blessing of god. She is also called bhag bhari (the blessed one or full of blessings or the one who brings blessings/fortune). Even if there is strong son preference, but once they have a son, they pray to have a daughter. "A house without a daughter, is not a house," said an old woman, "you will not get that much happiness and inner peace with a son, as you will get it with a daughter. The son is the bread winner, but the daughter is a blessing."

Honor of the Family

Apart from these sacred symbols, a daughter is also associated with the honor of the family. She is called Nang (literally means nakedness). A daughter has to keep honor of the family by refraining from any sexual affair with the strangers. Once she is found to have such a relationship, she might get killed by the family, or her family will secede all social ties with her after marrying her off in a remote area. Once she loses virginity, she ceases to be a Niyani, the pure, the goddess. She then becomes Kari, the black.

The reason a daughter is so much wrapped in these symbols is that the family will have to pay a heavy

price if she becomes a Kari. An elderly woman described consequences of such a situation in the following words:

When the daughter of Eidan of our neighboring village was found to be a Kari, the village people terminated all social relationships with him. He was forced to kill her daughter or leave the village. Since she was his only daughter, Eidan did not kill her, but left the village and then he married her off in very remote area. He no longer visits her, nor does she come to him. She is still alive, but she is dead for her father.

In case a father does not kill a Kari, and does not leave the village either, nobody will marry his other daughters, if he has more than one. He will have to bear the economic burden of supporting all her daughters as long as they are alive and also he will have to bear the insult and face demeaning attitude of the villagers. That's why the parents always remain vigilant of a daughter's activities so that they could ensure her virginity is intact.

She is sacred only as long as she is virgin. An unmarried who is virgin, even if she is 50 years old, is also called a Niyani. But when she violates the sacred boundaries, she is no more sacred. Her curse will be no more effective. Her poati will no longer be a sacred cloth. No parent will swear by her name. She will not be taken to the aggrieved party to end conflict and seek forgiveness.

There are no such symbols for boys or sons or men. Boy's virginity is not a matter of concern for the family or the society. It is the sexuality of the daughter that has to be guarded.

Conclusion

Niyani is a sacred term and associated with the virginity and purity of the daughter (Shah, 1912) (Babb, 1984), whereas the term Nang explicitly associates honor of the family with her sexuality. These symbols have been so imbibed into the minds of the people that everyone has to direct one's behavior accordingly. So long as the daughter is a virgin, hence Niyani or Nang, she is respected, feared and protected by all the men and women and she has to maintain such a status by controlling her sexuality and keeping herself pure and virgin. Once she violates these sacred boundaries by indulging in a sexual relationship, this evokes strong sentiments among both men and women and she might lose her life or she will be banished from the society. The symbols of Niyani and Nang are mainly used to inculcate in women to protect their sexuality. Men do not have to use force or strength to compel daughters to keep

their virginity intact. They use this force only when a daughter transgresses these symbolic boundaries.

References

- Babb, L. A. (1984). Indigenous Feminism in a Modern Hindu Sect. *Signs*, 9(3), 399-416.
- Bamberger, J. (1974). The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society. In M. Z. Rosaldo, & L. Lamphere, *Women, Culture, and Society* (pp. 263-280). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brown, D. (1991). *Human Universals*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Cassirer, E. (1972). *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. Yale University Press.
- Cohn, A. (1974). *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Eller, C. (2001). *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Fibiger, L., Ahlström, T., Bennike, P., & Schulting, R. J. (2013). Patterns of violence-related skull trauma in neolithic southern scandinavia. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 150(2), 190-202.
- Firth, R. (1973). *Symbols: Public and Private*. Ithaca: Cornell University.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, Inc. .
- Goldberg, S. (1973). *Why Men Rule: A Theory of Male Dominance*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
- Harris, M. (1977, November 13). *Why Men Dominate Women*. *New York Times Magazine*, 115-123.
- Martin, M. K., & Voorhis, B. (1975). *The Female of the Species*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ortner, S. B. (1972). Is female to male as nature is to culture? *Feminist Studies*, 5-31.
- Schug, G. R., Blevins, K. E., Cox, B., Gray, K., & Mushrif-Tripathy, V. (2013). Infection, Disease, and Biosocial Processes at the End of the Indus Civilization. *PLOS ONE*. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0084814
- Shah, N. (1912). *Invisible Routes, Invisible Lives: The Multiple Worlds of Runaway and Missing Women and Girls in Upper Sindh, Pakistan*. In J. Waldren, & I.-M. Kaminsk, *Learning From the Children: Childhood, Culture and Identity in a Changing World*. Berghan Books.
- Smuts, B. (1995, March). The evolutionary origins of patriarchy. *Human Nature*, 6(1), 1-32.
- Turner, V. (1975). *Symbolic Studies*. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 4, 145-161.
- Vonier, H. (2007). *Description of Matriarchy*. Retrieved 06 05, 2015, from matriarchy.info.
- Wrangham, R. W., & Peterson, D. (1996). *Demonic males: Apes and the origins of human violence*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Yusuf, K. (2009, December 20). *A daughter is equal to 7 qurans, they believe here*. Retrieved 06 07, 2015, from The Times of India.