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The Limits of Admittance and Diversity in Iraqi Kurdistan: Femininity and the Body of Du’a Khalil

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ABSTRACT  Concerns of racial, ethnic and religious divisions and establishing a culture whereby people from diverse backgrounds can live together in peace are central issues within discourses and representations of Iraq today. The violent clashes between Yezidi and Muslims in Northern Iraq during 2007 bespeak the limits of tolerance and commitment toward living together with a respect for each other’s differences that upholds the right to preserve and practice these. This violence gives voice to the terrifying and extreme consequences of the breakdown in peace between different people who occupy the same geographical space. Generally perceived as inflamed by the brutal killing of Yezidi teenager Du’a Khalil, this breakdown in the erstwhile – albeit short-term – peace between Muslims and Yezidi undoubtedly concerns issues of the increasing politicisation of religion, sectarian and ethnic divisions, feminine sexuality and the boundaries of community. Sacrificed for the honour of her family, for some Du’a is the victim of ancient religious or tribal traditions, the brutality of the barbaric and an unthinkable human rights violation. For others Du’a is a traitor to her family, to her community and to her religion. This article discusses the ways in which feminine embodiment signals the most valued possession and at the same time presents as the greatest threat to community. Paradoxically, as compellingly expressed by Rey Chow, the site of feminine difference both ensures divisions between diverse peoples and signals the potential erasure of these.

Introduction

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has become publicly known over recent years and particularly since the commencement of the US-led war on terror as the ‘relatively safe’ region of the war-ravaged country. Bombings are few and security is comparatively effective. The general assumption is that people can go about their daily business in peace and with increasing prosperity. However, there are limits

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2However as Taysi and Minwalla maintain, there is a very weak rule of law existent in Kurdistan and Iraq and a consequence of this is there is a rise in gender-related crimes that most often go unpunished. It is also important to acknowledge that prosperity in the developing region is unevenly distributed and that there is a widening gap between the wealthy and the poor. T. Taysi and S. Minwalla, ‘Structural Violence Against Women in Kurdistan, Iraq’, in KHRP Legal Review, 15 (June 2009).
to this peaceful coexistence of diverse peoples. These limits are apparent at the face of religious and ethnic tensions between the people who populate the region: Assyrians, Chaldeans, Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens, Shabak, Sunni, Shiite, Khorshidi, Kakayee and Yezidi. Furthermore – and for the most part unexpressed – limits are encountered at the site of those bodies of difference that carry the marks of femininity. Many women are killed every year in Kurdistan in the name of protecting family or patrilineal honour. For these women this so-called peaceful region holds very different meaning, and continues to be a place of insecurity. It is reasonable to consider that available statistics reveal only a percentage of the women killed in Iraqi Kurdistan on a daily basis. Moreover, alongside the prevalent violence in certain neighbourhoods, as has been widely depicted on news broadcasts over recent years, there is a general, well-known and alarmingly obfuscated killing of women – for being women – in all parts of the country.

This article examines the relationship between politicised notions of ethnic and religious violence and violence committed against women. I argue that considerations of gender and specifically femininity are key to understanding these interrelated expressions. The brutal killing of Du’a Khalil on 7 April 2007 and the

3Writing in Al-Ahali and posted on MEMRI, His Excellency Hussein Sinjari speaks of the fate of minorities in Iraq and in the Middle East in general. ‘Religious minorities in the Middle East – Jews, Christians and Baha’is – played a pioneering role in the blossoming of the sciences, philosophy, music, song, linguistics, lexicography, the press, and in ideological associations and parties … as well as in spreading the call for gender and ethnic equality and democracy, as well as in banking and in the economy – and I could go on. Today, the Christians are leaving these countries – their countries – after having lived in them generation after generation, with open minds, open hearts, and open arms … The emigration of the religious minorities is an indication of the decline of the culture of tolerance and the rise to prominence of its opposite: religious fanaticism, hatred of the other, and the spread of ideologies of obscurantist extremism’; H. Sinjari, ‘In Wake of Massacre of Yazidis: Iraqi Kurdish Liberal Hussein Sinjari on Minorities in Iraq and Middle East’, MEMRI, 1692 (23 August 2007), http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Area=sd&ID=SP169207&Page=archive#-ednref44, accessed December 2007.


5There are obvious and concurrent configurations of masculinity that are not specifically addressed here.
subsequent slaughter of 23 Yezidi men in retaliation for her killing provide a useful juncture for considering the possibilities for people from different ethnic and religious identities to live together in peace. Moreover, the murder of Du’a and the brutal retaliation are exemplary in an analysis of the relationship between ethnic and/or religious communities and gender violence.

This article has two main objectives. First, it demonstrates that ethnic and religious communities must be analysed as gendered communities. Ethnic and religious communities, whether in times of peace or in times of war, are movements involved in the ongoing construction and maintenance of identity, the representation of which is a modern political process that invariably obscures difference in the quest for coherence. This paper assesses the importance of specific constructs of femininity within analysis of these politicised identities. Second, the paper offers a way of reading the femininity of Kurdish women that questions reductive studies that position women as helpless victims of patriarchal communities and male violence. This analysis provides ways of examining the connections between communities configured through modes of gender and the violence inherent within articulations of ethnic and or religious authenticity.

Honour killings are immersed within systems where violence is structural and where violence permeates all levels of society. Reductive studies of women’s significance within community formation provide limited assessment of women’s own participation, and complicity, within the configuration of community. Moreover, studies that reduce women to positions of victim serve to perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes that further obfuscate such violence and generally confuse the underlying concerns. In many ways the case of Du’a Khalil refuses reductive analysis and offers unique opportunity to bring into question dichotomised assumptions that so often lie behind analysis of the violent repudiations inherent within ethnic, religious and gendered communities.

Du’a, a young woman from the Yezidi community of Bashiqa, was publicly murdered by her own religiously identified people for the crime of falling in love with a Muslim man. Her killing was captured on cell-phone video by participants and bystanders at the scene and widely disseminated on the internet and in the news media. Two weeks following her tragic death a bus carrying workers from a weaving factory in Mosul to their homes in a nearby Bashiqa was stopped by several cars filled with unidentified gunmen. The gunmen checked the identity cards of all passengers, asked the Christians to get off, ‘hijacked the bus with all the Yazidis still inside, and drove them to eastern Mosul, where they were lined up along a wall and shot to death.

11I use the most common spellings in print Yezidi, also spelt Yazidi and Ezidi.
14On 26 April 2007, the Al-Qaeda-founded Islamic State of Iraq issued a message stating that its men had killed the Yezidis. The message explained that they were killed in revenge for the death of this woman and for the death of all Muslims killed by these “impure [Yazidis],” and as part of the Plan of Honour declared by ISI Commander Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi’ (MEMRI, May 2007), http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP157207
execution-style’. After the killings, Yezidi took to the streets of Bashiqa. ‘Shops were shuttered and many Muslim residents closed themselves in their homes, fearing reprisal attacks’. There is general agreement that the executions were provoked by the killing and extensive coverage of Du’a’s death. As Nazand Begikhani states:

The footage was put on the internet days before the attack on the Yezidi workers in Mosul. It was also broadcast by the Kurdistan Islamic Group local TV network Komal. That sparked off a wave of attacks on the Yezidi community throughout Kurdish areas in Iraq. According to local media outlets, Friday preachers in several cities and towns, including Mosul and Kalar called for ‘jihad’ against Yezidi on the pretext that, and I quote ‘They killed a girl because she was converted to Islam’.

It was established by news media that the killings were in retaliation for the killing of a Muslim as Du’a had converted to Islam and was thus no longer Yezidi; Yezidi had killed a Muslim and thus the retaliation is reasoned to be both religiously and politically motivated:

Hence, the case of Do’a which is an honour-based killing has been used for political and ideological purposes by fundamentalist groups. It is not the stoning of Do’a and her savage murder which provoked such reaction, but what was perceived as the reason for her death.

Rather than paying attention to the violence of the crime, local media that immediately covered this brutal killing elevated the religious divisions between Muslims and Yezidis as the central concern. Media focus on the religious tensions is attributed as fuelling the violence that later culminated in the attack on the Yezidi workers. ‘Writers on Islamist websites called the woman a martyr and demanded that her death be avenged. In Mosul, Duaa was described by angry Muslims as “our martyred sister” as they vowed retaliation’.

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14Serrano, op. cit. The next day, a Sunni insurgent group linked to Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for a car bombing that targeted the offices of a Kurdish political party in Northern Iraq, saying it was to avenge the death of Du’a. Susman, op. cit.

15A Yezidi baker and three of his workers were killed in Mosul on 26 April, and two Yezidi policemen were killed three days later. IWPR, “Honour Killing” Spurs Fears of New Iraqi Conflict’, 2007, at http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2007/5/kurdlocal356.htm.

16The executions were in response to the killing two weeks before of a Yazidi woman who had recently converted to Islam (Serrano, op.cit.).


18Ibid.

19IWPR, op. cit.
Yezidi are a unique faith centred in the Kurdistan Iraq with around 500,000 followers.20 The Yezidi religious beliefs are very poorly understood, and some reports refer to them as Satan-worshippers. According to Ezster Spat, their religion ‘can be traced back to the faith of the Western Iranian immigrants arriving in this region more than three millennia ago’.21 There is dispute as to the ethnic origins of Yezidi and most agree that they are a distinct ethnic as well as religious community. The Yezidi Human Rights Organization22 argues that Yezidi were ‘forcefully misclassified as Arab’ in ethnicity under the regime of Saddam Hussein and, more recently, under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government they are ‘wrongfully classified as Kurdish’.23 They are insular, opposing marriage to non-Yazidis, ‘making it virtually impossible for non-Yazidis to convert to their religion’.24 Yezidi believe in an immortal soul, in reincarnation, that they are the descendants of Adam (not Eve) and that both good and evil are the forces of the one God. They believe that good and evil co-exist in human beings and that doing good or bad is a matter of human choice. Owing to their distinct beliefs and minority status in Iraq and Kurdistan, Yezidi have faced persecution under a succession of rulers, starting with Zoroastrian times, lasting through the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and continuing today.25 Since sectarian violence began, which has rapidly increased over the years of foreign occupation in Iraq, Yezidi have faced renewed attacks, specifically in the Sinjar district and Mosul. Yezidi students have left Mosul University with expectations of imminent attack and the Yezidi cultural centre in Ain Sifini was also a target of attack in 2007. Large-scale fatal attacks on Yezidi populations throughout 2007 and continuing thereafter have meant that Yezidi live with the ubiquitous fear of confronting violence.

Yezidi are the second largest non-Muslim religious community in Iraq. Although clearly influenced by the prominent religions that have occupied the

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21Spat, op. cit.
23For further information on Yezidi and their faith see www.yeziditruth.org/yezidi_voices. This point begs further investigation considering the disputed nature of the Ain Sifini territory that Du’a and the Yezidi belong to. There has been much contention over the ethnic make-up of the population of areas such as Kirkuk and the Mosul district.
24Susman, op. cit.
25Aso Haji, ‘Lalish is the Beginning of Life’ (2007), Baita Lalish, Kurdistan TV, Erbil, Kurdistan. Calling for the local Kurdish authorities to protect Yezidi from attack His Excellency Hussain Sinjari points to the hopelessness of a situation where the rule of law is weak and accountability and responsibility are vague. ‘Meanwhile, the central government and its institutions are absent from the region, and their inability to enforce security and order, and the inability of the American occupation forces to do their job of protecting people, makes it incumbent on the Peshmerga and the Kurdish administration to enforce law and order, by force if necessary, even if doing so runs contrary to the central government or the occupation forces. Protecting the population takes priority over satisfying Baghdad or Washington’. Sinjari, op. cit.
region, they are neither Muslim nor Christian and their religion – previously without sacred text – has until recently been transmitted only orally. Yezidi are a minority in Iraq as defined through their ethnic and religious identity as well as through their lack of formal and informal influence on governance. In a country that has long endured a dictatorship, sanctions and repetitive war, to be a minority in terms of political representation is to suffer.

Violence under the Flag of Honour

Honour killings are a daily concern in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and some argue that they have been on the rise since the region gained semi-autonomy after the Kurdish uprising in 1991. They have been variously attributed to the practices of ancient traditional culture, religious doctrine, geography, poverty, lack of education, the requirements of patriliny and to misogyny. Some perceive honour killings as being a problem of the East and they are largely believed to be predominant amongst Islamic communities, although the practice of these killings predates Islam by centuries. There is an alarmingly violent response to coverage of such brutal acts from people of the world that perceive themselves as civilised. As a consequence, cultures that practice honour killings are often interpolated as barbaric and inhumane: lacking civilisation and humanity. While it is not in question that these murders are currently more prevalent amongst certain religious and geographically located communities, honour killings cannot be reduced to religion, geography or culture. They are, however, quite clearly inscribed within patriarchal notions that ambivalently devalue femininity and within discourses of extreme violence. It is the embeddedness of the killing of women within these very discourses that refuses the propensity to isolate the
insidious origins that enable such a practice, to a particular people, time or place.\textsuperscript{34}

According to Diane King,\textsuperscript{35} in Iraqi Kurdistan the prevalence of honour killing means that it is impossible for Kurdish women in Iraq to have sexual relations outside of marriage and women live in constant fear of their families.\textsuperscript{36} According to Shahrazad Mojab and Amir Hassanpour:\textsuperscript{37}

Honour Killing is a tragedy in which fathers and brothers kill their most beloved, their daughters and sisters. More tragic, if that be possible, at times mothers and sisters not only consent but participate in the crime. Killing occurs in a family structured where members are closely tied in bonds of affection, compassion and love. Here affection and brutality coexist and in unity.\textsuperscript{38}

King maintains that girls are acculturated with an intense fear of becoming a victim, an omnipresent threat of death at the hands of their families, and from a young age they are socialised to embody the potential of honour and shame. As Choman Hardi says:

\[\text{[f]}\text{rom childhood girls’ bodies are associated with shame and honour. Little girls are continuously told to sit properly and cover their legs. They are taught to clean after their fathers and brothers. Little boys are taught that females should be at their service.}\textsuperscript{39}\]

It is difficult to accurately determine the numbers of victims of honour killings; however it is clear that this practice presents a threat to many Kurdish women in Iraq. Limitations on expressions of female sexuality continue to be critical in both formal and informal governing of the people.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{34}While not all families participate in such surveillance of their daughters, all members, male and female, do participate in patriarchal systems and are thus implicitly complicit in the various means of surveillance in which the community as a whole engages. However, juxtaposing the brutality inherent within the killings alongside the responses of public outrage from Iraqi, Kurdish and Yezidi people suggests that there are a multiplicity of local perspectives and reactions to the killing of Du’a. This multiplicity refuses homogenising and dichotomised representations. Such representations only further obfuscate the problems through elevating imaginary binaries between people, failing to acknowledge involvement and inscribing only certain people with the characteristics of barbaric violence.

\textsuperscript{35}King, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{36}While this may be the case for specific Kurdish women, it must be acknowledged that Kurdish women are not a homogenous people. Like other women they have dreams, desires and live in a world full of variations. Kurdish women are not all afraid of their families and do not all live under this form of repression. They like other women express their sexuality in a multitude of ways. This depiction of Kurdish women is that of a very specific and increasingly, perhaps outdated, perspective and therefore cannot be generalised across all people or time.


\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., p. 86.

\textsuperscript{39}Choman, op.cit.

\textsuperscript{40}That this form of violence continues without accountability anywhere in the world signals concern for all women and all people of the world. State-sanctioned killings and complicity within the continued practice of honour killings in the Kurdistan region of Iraq have been noted by many commentators on the region (M. Mahmoud, ‘Human Chattel’, 2007, at http://www.ekurd.net/misc/articles/misc2007/5/50kurdlocal349.htm (accessed March 2010); King, op. cit.; Taysi and Minwalla, op. cit.).
The killing of Du’a was carried out with unthinkable violence and that this crime has gone uncharged is an assault on the humanity of all of the world’s people. The retaliatory attack on the Yezidi men was conducted with a violence that has become a signature of today’s Iraq, but nevertheless with the same fatality and assault on humanity. ‘Women’s groups say the video shows Iraq’s backward slide as religious and ethnic intolerance takes hold. “There is a new Taliban controlling the lives of women in Iraq”’. These related incidents of ethnic, religious, sectarian and gender violence are generally not pronounced as part of public discourse in Iraq. Religious or sectarian and ethnic violence are for the most part reported as separate issues to that of gender violence. While feuds over killings and in the name of honour do occur and are reported in local media, most often the killing of a woman is the end of the business of disrepute.

The Case of Du’a Khalil

The case of Du’a is extraordinary for several reasons; her perceived sexual dishonour was in relation to her love for a man from another faith and her conversion to that faith; her killing was captured on video and broadcast widely; Du’a was a member of religious, ethnic minority group that has suffered persistent attacks for many centuries; she had lived in an area of disputed territory where the population is diverse religiously, ethnically and linguistically, and her murder by a group of frenzied men was a public spectacle with many onlookers both at the actual killing and through media coverage of this. It is not surprising that her death has attracted so much response within public discourse. However, what was not predicted was the retaliatory slaughter that followed, presumably in the name of religious or communal identity.

The association between the killing of Du’a and the reprisal attacks on the religious community has not been discussed in any great detail; this invites interrogation and raises many questions. Why is it that the killing of Du’a caused such an outburst of violence, as the unmitigated eruption of hatred between the

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41Since the writing of this article, on 27 March 2010, four men (two of whom are the brothers of Du’a) have been charged and sentenced to death under the Iraqi central government judicial system for the killing of Du’a. ‘According to official sources at Ninawa Criminal Court, the four people charged with the stoning of Du’a Khalil Aswad on 7 April 2007 have been sentenced to death. The decision was made on 27 March, just three weeks before the third anniversary of Du’as murder’. H. Mahmoud, ‘Executing Du’a Khalil’s killers is not justice, but a violation of human rights’ (2010), http://www.stophonourkillings.com/?q=node/4523

42Stated by Hana Edwar, leader of the Amal Organization for Women. Susman, op. cit.

43See Taysi and Minwalla, op. cit., for a discussion on traditional practices of mediation that call for the killing of women to resolve disputes between groups. The authors argue that these are preferred practices of dispute resolution and are often sanctioned by the state.

44In her research on Honour killings Beth Baron makes the point ‘that public accusations of loss of honour are crucial to setting in motion family honour crimes – the killing of a girl – and that acknowledgment in public remains crucial to the decision to kill or not to kill’. Beth Baron, ‘Women, Honour, and the State: Evidence from Egypt’, Middle Eastern Studies 42:1 (2006), pp. 1–20 at 2.

45Speaking to women and women’s groups in Kurdistan it is clear that there is a perception that the case of Du’a has been exploited for religious and political means. ‘The killing of Du’a is however just another killing practiced by family members and the community at large. It is not about Muslim/Yezidi relations because there are Muslims who have married with Yezidi. Honour Killings are mainly about disobeying the male members of the family and dishonouring them. It is not important whether the man whom you have been with is perceived by your community as from another faith’ (anonymous, 2009).
different religious communities? How could the sexuality of a 17-year-old girl present such a threat to the community and what is the nature of this threat? How is it that such a powerless individual, a girl in a patriarchal community that governs her almost every move, was responsible for unleashing such rage and terror, such violence? What is it about her feminine sexuality, her virginity, that is so esteemed that, if it falls into disrepute, she must be destroyed? How is it possible to understand the ambivalence where, on the one hand, her purity is venerated and on the other there is a willingness to kill in such a violent manner? Why is it that the desires of a young girl came to signify shame for the entire community and invoke the subsequent collective violence witnessed in her brutal punishment?

Shifting Anthropology of Honour Killings and Sovereignty in Iraqi Kurdistan

In her endeavour to give reason to the practice of honour killing in Iraqi Kurdistan, King draws attention to the paradox where on the one hand there is a backdrop of peace and stability in the region, and on the other there has been an increase in the killing of women since the Kurdish uprising of 1991. At this time, according to King, the logic of honour killing expanded from that directed towards protecting familial lineage to one of protecting the state. Providing analysis of honour killings in Egypt and the wider Arab and Middle Eastern region, Beth Baron also observes the association between the state and family in such practices. Baron argues that the relationship has a long history, dating back for more than a century and a half. Although it may be the case that honour killings increased after 1991, it seems likely that they did occur and were formally sanctioned prior to the Kurdish uprising. King maintains that, after the uprising of 1991, the local Kurdish peshmerga were sanctioned to kill one woman every day for suspected transgressions of Kurdish honour. Juxtaposing notions of state borders and state sovereignty to those of community defined through patrilineal kinship, she makes the point that honour killing in patrilineal societies such as Iraqi Kurdistan concerns issues of the right to govern. This entails the sovereign ‘ability of a lineage and/or the state to define its composition, to decide how it will utilise its resources, to define its boundaries, and to use violence’. While the newly formed Kurdistan region set about defining and defending its geographical borders in efforts to protect the territory from foreign invasion the patriliny defined and protected its corporeal borders from enemy penetration. The keeping out of aliens by the fortification of the lineage and of the region requires that the father and the brother, as well as formal governing bodies, heavily curtail the movements of female family members. King reasons that, if women hold the key to family honour, if she is the potential carrier of the enemy seed, it is vital that she and Kurdistan be secured from penetration. In this line of reasoning, her borders, like those of the territory,
must be protected and it is the duty of the male members of the family to stop this threat. It is their social responsibility to kill not just the enemy that she carries but also her; she has exposed the community to risk of invasion. She is a traitor and she can no longer be trusted. She must be destroyed.

In appraisal of Middle Eastern understanding of lineage and of the root causes of honour killings, King argues that it is commonly understood that ‘only males can keep a category going from generation to generation, and every female is potentially the bearer of offspring who don’t belong to her own category’. She claims that, amongst Middle Eastern people in general and Kurds in particular, there is a common belief that the father impregnates the mother with a seed that passes on 100 per cent of the father’s lineage. Women’s bodies are the mere incubators of the father’s offspring and if a woman carries the child of the enemy, that child will carry the enemy father’s lineage entirely rather than also carrying lineage from the mother. The foetus in this case is the representation of the enemy father: the enemy other that threatens to penetrate the body and the community.

In this argument, the honour of the family is threatened when, through their sexuality, women transgress the boundaries prescribed within the patrilineal group. If the wrong person enters the woman’s body there is a crisis of lineage wherein there is the possibility that the woman – the daughter or the sister – will carry the enemy’s genes. It is female transgression – which opens a space through which the enemy can enter – that evokes such male anger and willingness to kill. It is through her actions that his brutality is unleashed. She leads him to violence and thus in this logic she herself is responsible for the violence she endures; it is her fault and her death is her accountability. This affront to the sovereignty of the male, of the patriliny, evokes a response of anger that sanctions the killing. The honourable male members of the patrilineal group must prevent all possibility of a border crossing where the enemy could enter, and must destroy such a crossing. Consequently the male killers are valorised for the homicide. They have restored the family and honour by killing the traitor who has opened herself to the germ of the enemy. The spilling of blood supposedly washes away the shame or dishonour.

There is an obvious construction of a specific masculinity that is central to discussions of honour killings. Analysis of masculinity is vital to the concern as a whole but beyond the limits of this paper. However, it must be noted that the expectations, indeed requirements, placed upon masculine subjects are themselves violent and violating.

This is quite different than Baron’s analysis of lineage. Baron sees sexual promiscuity as carrying the possibility of tainting the familial bloodline whereas King’s analysis indicates more of a total blood transfusion. Any sexual activity outside of marriage is considered wrong and thus all people – friends or foe – are the wrong people.

According to women’s groups the killing of Du’a functioned to give impetus to honour killings in the region, ‘Since the seventh of April, so many women have been killed. So many women, it has been packed, packed with killing women’. Barry Newhouse, ‘Honour Killings Fuel Tensions in Iraq’s Kurdish North’, VOA News, 8 May 2007, http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2007-05/2007-05-08 voa58.cfm?moddate=2007-05-08.

It is generally understood that honour killings in the region are underpinned by a fear that failing to do so would result in social ostracism and isolation for the family involved.
Rethinking the Logic of Patriliny

Women in this logic pass no characteristics onto the child. Under such logic it makes sense that the child is a potential enemy while – outside of her sexualised role as the maternal – the woman does not exist. She is a mere vessel in service of the perpetuation of his community, for the fertilisation of his seed. What King illustrates that is of interest here is that women are viewed as potential traitors to their own communities. In taking guard over this potential traitor she is reduced to her body and her hymen functions as the border and the space between the masculine communities. She is not an agent in the configuration of her own meaning as she is spoken for within the text of the masculine through either the assault of the enemy father or that of the traditional father.58

This analysis is insightful and convincing as an ethnographic study. However, it is problematic for several reasons. First, although within this argument there is an acknowledgement of female complicity within the discourse of honour killing, it functions to inscribe notions of Kurdish – and by extension Middle Eastern – femininity with virtually no form of agency or physical power; perceived as the mere incubator of the masculine nation. She is, in this account, the object of his control whether he is the familial protector or unfamiliar penetrator. Second, the analysis situates the enemy other as the subject that embodies both the primary threat to the community as well as that subject whose potential presence demands the obsessive surveillance of women. It is because of the enemy, because of the possibility of the enemy’s presence, that he curtails her sexuality. Her threatening potential lies precisely within concerns of the enemy’s active penetration of her body, a body that’s provides ground for the continuation of his community. In this case the killing is carried out due to the threat of the other, due to an obsession with the enemy other.

In respect to the position articulated that it is understood within Middle Eastern cultures that the father passes on 100 per cent of his lineage through the hosting feminine body, there is a failure here to acknowledge the complicated scientific knowledge held by the people of the region. Even if it were the case that people are unaware of genetic inheritance, surely within the reason of this argument simple education in the biological sciences would eliminate honour-related violence; this seems unlikely. Reducing honour killing to a belief in the omnipotence of the masculine seed fails to acknowledge the sophistication of Eastern epistemologies and further fails to interrogate the complex system of violence through which women negotiate their lives. As Tanyel Taysi and Sherizaan Minwalla observe, ‘[w]omen in the Kurdistan region, as with the rest of Iraq, suffer significant abuse of their human rights, and experience a fundamental lack of equality in all domains of life’.59

Violence against women within communities in Iraqi Kurdistan takes on many forms and, while these are predictably related to the control of sexuality, there is insufficient evidence that killings are primarily invoked by the presence of a perceived enemy. For instance, women are also killed for sexual transgressions that involve a male from within their patrilineal group; they are killed because they are victims of rape and because they are victims of incest; they are killed for a plethora of sexualised imaginings. Women and girls (and sometimes men) are

59Taysi and Minwalla, op. cit., p. 2.
killed for transgressions both inside and outside their lineage, both inside and outside their familial, religious or ethnic groups. That they have transgressed proscribed mores of sexual behaviour with someone perceived as an enemy is rarely the reason for the killing. Furthermore, while the father and the brothers who are the keepers of the patriliny are in most cases the perpetrators of the actual killing these are most often negotiated within the community – male and female members – and, contrary to the central logic of this argument, women in Kurdistan are also executed by their husbands and in the case of Du’a by the community, not just by patrilineal blood relatives.

**The Potential of Female Sexuality**

In this section I engage the work of Rey Chow to argue that female sexuality carries a potential beyond being the host of the enemy. When considering the many and varied reasons that lie behind honour-related violence, it is clear that honour killings are not carried out due to a primary obsession with the threat that an enemy might enter the community and produce new enemies within the seditious site of the feminine host body. Rather than perceiving the cause of these killings as being due to an obsession with the other – with the enemy – it is more helpful and accurate to perceive them as due to an obsession embodied within the threat of feminine sexuality itself; it is this danger that primarily concerns the community. In this sense the threat is embedded within that which is familiar rather than that which is not. The community is obsessed with itself and, rather than fearing the entry of the enemy, the most crucial concern in this case is that which regards the coherence, purity and authenticity of the self, and the related control of women’s bodies as a means of ensuring this. That is, the obsession is not with the threat of the enemy other entering the community but rather with controlling the sexuality of women and girls and maintaining authentic pure identity through elevating both honour and atavistic imaginings of community. This obsession with purity signals a concern that identity itself is fragile. It is the fragile nature of the community that demands the risk of female sexuality be prohibited in such ways. Her sexuality possesses the potential to dilute this purity through its fertile possibilities. She embodies a physical form of power which is viewed as ominous and which must be curtailed in the interests of purity. The fragile masculine community requires that her sexuality be curtailed for the survival of that authentic group of people.

Discussing the configuration of anti-colonial identity, Chow sheds light on issues of the contaminating and diluting potential of female sexual agency. She offers a psychoanalytic argument by developing Franz Fanon’s reading of Freud’s seminal text ‘Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics’. Chow shows that articulations of femininity are problematic for the minority group that strives to seek representation within the space of the dominant culture. She argues that, as female sexuality

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61 Chow, op. cit.


holds the potential of biological and cultural miscegenation, it must be excluded from expressions of identity based on uncontaminated difference. Interrogating identity formation in regard to the intersections of community, race and sex, she maintains that anti-colonial communities that carry the marks of race and sex are ultimately repudiated by formations of the modern nation. The racialised body (the body of the colonised) will never quite assume modern representation because Western metaphysics that govern identity formation elevate whiteness as privilege and blackness as excess to identity. More specifically, Chow portends that women’s bodies must be excluded because of their potential to dilute the difference upon which the racialised body articulates itself. Through this line of reasoning, he will never be fully admitted into the postcolonial community because he carries the marks of race that fall outside of Western aesthetics, while her admittance represents his potential erasure:

Most crucially, this construction, because it admits women as sexuality and nothing more, leaves no room for the woman of colour to retain her membership among her own racial/ethnic community. In terms of the community formation that is based on race, the admittance that Fanon gives the woman of colour is solely based on sex. Fanon’s reading means that woman of colour is either a black traitor (when she chooses the white man) or white woman (when she chooses the black man). Fanon’s admittance of the sexual agency of the woman of colour signifies her inevitable expulsion from her community.

Within discourses of anti-colonial identity or the identity politics of minorities, women’s bodies are configured as ambivalent: necessary for the reproduction of the nation and simultaneously containing the possibility of contamination and dilution via miscegenation. Women, as Partha Chatterjee astutely articulates, are strategically engaged as the keepers of traditional culture and of the purity and authenticity of difference.

However, as Chow observes, in returning to Freud’s text:

Even though Freud’s account leaves many questions unanswered, what stands out from his text is the unmistakable recognition of female sexuality as a form of physical power. It is this physical power, this potentiality for transmission, confusion, and reproduction through actual bodies, that

64 Chow argues that Fanon’s reading of Freud demands that the formation of postcolonial communities be seen as an erasure of the very body. Women within Fanon’s interpretation are located as universally alike and universally problematic for articulations of the postcolonial nation. By acknowledging postcolonial female sexual agency, Fanon attaches the meaning of black women to sexuality and as such all women are subsumed into the universalizing notion of femininity, Chow, op. cit.
65 Chow, op. cit., p. 17.
68 In his discussion of Bengali women Chatterjee maintains that women must represent the tradition through which difference is articulated. While he can mix within the public space of the dominant culture, her role is to maintain tradition within the private sphere and to uphold authentic difference.
could break down all boundaries and thus disrupt social order in the most fundamental fashion. Because of this, female sexuality itself must be barred from entering a community except in the most non-transgressive, least contagious form.69

The potential of women’s sexual agency, in this account, is viewed as a threat to the community that is delineated through expressions of purity and authentic difference. Women’s sexual agency is taboo and excommunicated due to the power it contains for miscegenation – the power to create the child of mixed bloodlines – rather than because she has proven to be the carrier of the 100% enemy. Her body is the vessel that embraces the possibility to give life to a new kind of community. The threat embodied by women is that of impurity which leads to a new type of community, one that has blurred boundaries where bloodlines are mixed, one that has the potential to water down or erode demarcations that ensure the maintenance of difference. Purity, as it at once signifies difference and identity, becomes the ground upon which Yezidi identity is articulated. She is simultaneously treasured, necessary and threatening to the future of the uncontaminated religious and ethnic community.

Chow’s analysis is useful in better understanding the relationship between the case of Du’a’s death and the politicised murders of the religious group. As with identity formed through racial discourse of the colonised, religious minorities such as the Yezidi in Iraq endure a similar struggle in the establishment and maintenance of their identity as coherent, distinct and unadulterated; there are similar repudiations in regard to religious communities in Iraq. The minority, and in this case the Yezidi, continuously strive to maintain their difference as defined within the discourse of religion with distinction from the dominant religious group. The dominant religion in Iraq being Islam, Yezidi have struggled for centuries to ward off invasion by many attackers including the Islamic army. They have resisted the general contaminating affects of Islamisation, Arabisation and forced conversion as destructive forces on their unique and individuated identity. These persistent attacks have continued over recent years and are generally retaliated with violence directly towards the actual enemy rather than towards the body of the self. However, with such a numerically small and threatened population, the business of her fertility is certainly central to the life of the religious group spoken through notions of purity, authenticity and difference. The body of Yezidi difference, threatened on so many accounts, secures its life within the body of the feminine subject. It is upon her fertility that the people maintain authenticity and distinction. Simultaneously it is through her feminine fertility that the community is cast into fragility. The bodily difference of woman becomes the ground upon which communities are constructed and contested. She provides the fertile site through which the relationships between the different people are forged and the ground upon which ethnicity is kept clean. Conversely, it is through her body that the threat of miscegenation and contamination witnessed in the case of Du’a is contained, and through that same body that this threat is negotiated, kept at bay or eliminated.

In essence, the feminine body becomes a threat to both communities. The bodies of women signify the borders between communities, protectors and perpetrators. Located as the tortured body of sexualised surveillance, of honour, the body of

69Chow, op. cit., p. 11.
pollution and threat – to both communities – she bespeaks both the weakness and the strength of the people. Her corporeality signifies both lack and excess to the Yezidi people. The possibilities of erasure are contained within her body, as are the possibilities of expansion. Her body not only throws the community into anxiety regarding enemy penetration but also signifies a different kind of loss to the people: contaminating, diluting, weakening and modernising. She is the body of risk, she possesses the reproductive power of contamination and purity, the physiological potential to contaminate, muddy up/weaken the lineage. The feminine subject is very much more than a docile incubator, a vessel of fertility awaiting impregnation. It is through the miscegenating potential of her body as a source of physical power that the protector and the perpetrator – the two communities – are simultaneously divided and connected. As such she is the threatening body of contagion imperative to analysis of the discord between communities as well as in imagining a space where people from diverse backgrounds can live together in peace. It is upon the bodies of women that the imaginings of subjectivities of ethnic, racial and religious purity are staged. It is upon the bodies of women that men dance the imaginings of their politicised subjectivities of purity, and wage their scenes of protective and retaliatory violence.

Conclusion

Establishing a culture whereby people from diverse backgrounds can live together, in peace and prosperity, a culture where people do not simply tolerate the diversities of others but actively acknowledge, respect and uphold the rights of all people to live without fear is critical in the development of Kurdistan and Iraq. Addressing the aspirations of and obstacles to development has generally focused on economic growth, on oil and gas, foreign trade, investment, security and political reform as well as on overcoming religious, sectarian and ethnic discord. Little has been discussed in regard to women’s participation in such reforms or of the urgency to improve the poor levels of security and prosperity for women. However, analysis of the vital role of gender and of femininity within such peaceful cultural imaginings is imperative to understanding the possibilities and the perils that may emerge. Moreover, when considering the serious threats to the security of women on a daily basis, it is salient that a preventative position, which ensures the basic right to live without fear of violence and to be guaranteed security is yet to be established. This demands immediate attention.

What the horrifying murder of Du’a and the reprisal attacks on the Yezidi reveal is that configurations of community, of religion, of violence and of gender cannot be assessed as independent concerns. Discourses of gender, of femininity and of masculinity as well as those of violence, are mobilised in the construction and maintenance of these political constructs. It is vital that the rights of cultural preservation and religious expression of all religious communities are upheld. There are several unique and threatened religious communities in Iraq whose enduring welfare, security and dignity are of paramount importance. However a

70In assessing a situation as a security risk or as safe, relatively safe or dangerous, the security of all people must be considered. These assessments with regard to Iraq and Kurdistan must consider the safety of the local people in addition to that of the visitors, foreign investors and those conducting business. When brutal public killings such as that of Du’a and of the Yezidi men occur it is evident that the safety of local men, women, children, old people, the poor and those lacking political connections cries out for attention.
community’s quest for coherence and for survival cannot be supported through violent prohibitions. In the case of Du’a, the expectations of femininity are violently imposed and demarcated as essential, with no scope for flexibility or variation. The expectations of masculinity are imposed with equal force and rigid positioning. While religious and ethnic communities give rise to certain gender conditions in their establishment, community requirements, customs, traditions and religions must never be used as justification for acts of violence, which in due course diminish the esteem of a community.

In consideration of the escalation of violence that the reporting of the death of Du’a provoked, it is imperative that we take seriously the possible consequences that our commentaries may have. The story of Du’a is one of a girl who took great risks for love, a story that could have ended quite differently. As it was, her commitment to and belief in this love aroused reactions of unmitigated rage and violence throughout the communities of northern Iraq and beyond. Likewise, the fear that Du’a endured spread throughout the communities and the violence that she suffered became used as a justification for the proliferation of further politicised violence and suffering.

When looking closely at who represents the most corporeal threat to Du’a as a Yezidi woman, the supposed enemy is almost indistinguishable from the self. Threats of bodily danger for her include her protector and her aggressor. The case of Du’a reveals an uncanny reminder that the familiar and foreign, barbaric and civil, self and other, friend and enemy occupy and co-exist in the same space and that our obsessions with others are indeed obsessions with ourselves. For a woman living within a system that is built upon the violent prohibition of sexuality and persistent desire for purity, it is hard to reason that it is she who is cast as responsible for the violence and as traitor to the community. If peace and prosperity are to be established for all people in a community, adherence to the myth of purity and rigid understandings of culture as configured through atavistic and uncontaminated connections to ancient cultural and religious mores that demand such gendered demarcations and sexual prohibitions must be questioned. The ethnic and gender consequences of violence and the inherent repudiations within such configurations must be openly confronted. The falsity of purity and unadulterated difference must be acknowledged.

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71I have argued elsewhere that international response of ‘civilised’ outrage to the death of Du’a is implicitly involved in the perpetuation of the same system of violence. Reducing violence to specific events that are reasoned to be unrelated serves to obscure the insidiousness of violence that keeps such systems alive as well as to distance the respondent from such systems. Phelps, op. cit.