

Language, Power and Honour: Using Murder to Demonise Muslims



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Language, Power and Honour: Using Murder to Demonise Muslims

In the past few weeks numerous cases of so called 'honour killings' have been reported in the media. However in the majority of articles, there has been a lack of distinction between 'honour killings' and 'Muslims' giving the impression that both are inextricably linked.

This briefing will examine some of the judgements made in the language and also examine the values and perceptions carried by the authors that permeated as a result, into wider society.

The articles to be examined feature on the BBC news online website news.bbc.co.uk and in The Telegraph although other news agencies have made almost identical errors. The two specific cases chosen reflect the clear difference in reporting styles within each media.

The first case, of Abdalla Yones who was recently sentenced to life imprisonment for killing Heshu Yones his daughter, was reported in both the BBC and The Telegraph on 30th September 2003.

Islam and Christianity

Although headlines are designed to grab attention The Telegraph banner is clearly provocative, it reads:

'Muslim cut his daughter's throat for taking a Christian boyfriend'ⁱ

Though the BBC's headline is not sensationalist in the same way, the teaser describes the case in an almost identical fashion:

'A Muslim man is beginning a life sentence for murdering his daughter because he disapproved of her Christian boyfriend.'ⁱⁱ

Here the perpetrator being identified specifically as 'Muslim' and the boyfriend of the victim identified only as being of Christian origin is presented to be the crux of the issue. Here, all Muslims by extension are positioned against western society and Christianity in particular. Both the headlines and the teaser graphically describe the horrific act termed an 'honour killing' –which is not Muslim specific, but in these articles is clearly attributed to an Islamic identity as a supposedly major factor related to the crime. It misdirects attention to a non-existent Muslim – Christian conflict, through the terrible actions of one individual.

By using religion, a broad and sweeping identity, and linking it to violent crime or indeed any kind of crime, fear and hatred towards that specific identity naturally result. The link between the Afro-Caribbean community and crime is a case in point, where many people still feel fearful of being mugged when walking past people of that origin.

Westernisation

The BBC refers to the perpetrators fear that his daughter 'was becoming westernised'ⁱⁱⁱ though readers would have to make their own assumptions as to what this actually meant. The Telegraph on the other hand makes quite explicit what they mean when they refer to the 'westernisation' of the victim:

'Heshu [the victim] used a mobile phone, preferred to spend time with her friends rather than at home and wore make-up – always applying it at college or a friend's house.'^{iv}

The absurdity of equating being westernised with using a mobile phone and make-up is clear. If it is these qualities that define 'westernisation' then more or less everyone is prey to Muslim or Islamic wrath. The Islamic identity has been painted as something not just alien and barbaric but also ridiculous.

Islam and violence

The articles in question have rooted the Islamic faith into a story containing a significant degree of violence, and by this it appears that violence is the only language that Muslims understand. In addition both the BBC and The Telegraph report that Abdalla Yones himself requested the death penalty, though this may have been for numerous reasons, the context of the articles argue that Muslims have no regard for life whatsoever, not even their own. Islam must be violent and oppressive, goes the implicit argument, as here is living proof:

'Yones attacked her with a kitchen knife, stabbing her 11 times and slitting her throat. He then attempted to cut his own throat and threw himself from the third floor balcony of the family's flat in Acton.'^v

The references made reported in both articles by the victim of longstanding physical abuse before her death further add to this impression, again because her father is identified as a Muslim rather than simply 'Abdalla Yones':

'Hey for an older man you have a good punch and kick. I hope you enjoyed testing your strength on me, it was fun being on the receiving end. Well done.'

Ironically Mr Yones himself acknowledged the negative perceptions already in existence with regards to Muslims by the fact he tried to blame 'Islamic extremists'^{vi} or 'Al Qaeda members'^{vii} for the death of his daughter;

'He said they had been attacked by Islamic extremists who burst into their home.'^{viii}

This indicates quite strongly the existing perception of Islam as violent and irrational, to the extent that it was used as a way of trying to rationalise the murder to investigators by Mr Yones himself.

Islam and women

Islam and gender is a highly contentious issue in any case, and the articles in both media fan the flames of misconception. Here a 'Muslim' man kills his daughter because she is having a relationship with a 'Christian'. The value placed on the life of a woman by this so called patriarchal religious system enables the acceptability of such crime within its culture. This is certified by comments made by the investigators with regard to those 'members of the community, or his friends' who 'tried to assist him in that cover up.' According to The Telegraph who claim this includes the mother, who officers believe

'has more information about the case than she has disclosed to them so far.'

This suggested collusion further denigrates Islam and Muslims insofar as it depicts Muslim women themselves as voluntarily contributing to their own oppression.

Examples of better media practice

The second case to be examined is that of Tafarak Hussain who killed his cousin on the day of her wedding and Razaqat Hussain who helped him escape. The report featured in the BBC on the 15th October 2003 and The Telegraph on the 16th October 2003. In this instance both media neither refer to the religion of the perpetrators nor their ethnic origin. Other than the names of the individuals concerned, both reports give no indication of the origin of either the victim or the perpetrator except when it is mentioned that:

'Tafarak, from Bordesley Green, Birmingham, took Razaqat to meet a taxi driver who drove him to Heathrow Airport, from where he fled to Pakistan.'^{ix}

And again in the BBC,

'Tafarak Hussain then helped his cousin to escape to Pakistan'^x

Although this still does not conclusively prove the origin of the perpetrator it does however relegate the issue of origin and religion as non-relevant. There is no mention of any incompatible values by the reporters of either Pakistanis or Muslims with the west.

Further, the reason attributed to the murder of the young woman has been related to the breaking of 'family custom' in The Telegraph and the fact that the murdered woman was to marry a man 'who was not a blood relative' in the BBC. The description cited is very specific to the incident in question, as opposed to the previous article where the motivations were described as being the hate of all that is western in the perpetrator's daughter as being generic to Muslim culture.

The reporting of this case does not cause the readers to believe that Muslims are either violent or oppressive to women. This was simply a tragic crime.

It is interesting to note that it is not impossible to report on incidents and crime without reference to race or religion as both the BBC and The Telegraph have testified through the second set of articles being examined. Although the specifics of the cases were different,

there is evidently a lack of consistency in the portrayal of crimes that have are deemed by the police and thus the media to be generically similar^{xi}. The terms used in one article demonise an entire community whilst on the other hand, where specific terms and words are chosen more carefully, a more accurate report results without the problematic repercussions that make Muslims feel they have to make loud statements condemning something that everyone should already know is contrary to Islam.

Other examples of the problematic use of language by other agencies

Another disturbing aspect with specific regards to the reporting of the case of Abdalla Yones is the use of language used by practitioners in law enforcement agencies and the court system. It was reported both in the BBC and The Telegraph that the judge himself cites 'irreconcilable cultural differences'. The Telegraph further adds:

'Scotland Yard described Heshu's death as an "honour killing" brought about by a "clash of cultures" '

It is worrying that this belief that Islam in all its cultural manifestations is permanent in its incompatibility with the west, has permeated into all facets of civil life. This is also borne out by the fact that there have been twelve cases of so called 'honour killings' in the UK carried out by those belonging to a multitude of faiths with two more currently pending in the court system. However the only ones to receive this type of publicity are where the perpetrators are Muslim.

The two Telegraph and two BBC News online articles are attached as appendices and can be read through with the foregoing borne in mind. Demonisation of communities as innately criminal has had not only serious societal repercussions but genocidal ones from Europe to Central Africa. The issue of 'honour killings' as a signifier of the process of demonisation against Muslim (and other BME) communities needs to be engaged with by media and the agencies concerned. Prejudice may often be innocent but the results are uniformly horrific.

Appendix 1 Two examples of bad practice

A. Sue Clough and Sean O'Neil 'Muslim cut his daughters throat for taking a Christian boyfriend' The Telegraph 30 September 2003

B. 'Honour killing' father begins sentence' BBC news online 30 September 2003

A.

Sue Clough and Sean O'Neil 'Muslim cut his daughters throat for taking a Christian boyfriend' The Telegraph 30 September 2003

Muslim cut his daughter's throat for taking a Christian boyfriend

By Sue Clough and Sean O'Neill

(Filed: 30/09/2003)

A Kurdish Muslim murdered his 16-year-old daughter because he disapproved of her western way of life and Christian boyfriend, the Old Bailey heard yesterday.

Abdalla Yones, 48, cut his daughter Heshu's throat and left her to bleed to death. He had subjected her to months of beatings before killing her in a frenzied knife attack.

Yones, who until last week denied murdering Heshu, asked the court to impose the death sentence but was told that was not possible under English law. He was jailed for life.

Sentencing him, Judge Neil Denison, said the killing was "a tragic story arising out of irreconcilable cultural differences between traditional Kurdish values and those of western society."

Scotland Yard described Heshu's death as an "honour killing" brought about by a "clash of cultures" between Yones – a refugee from Iraqi Kurdistan, where such murders are common – and his westernised daughter.

Heshu used a mobile phone, preferred to spend time out with her friends rather than at home and wore make-up – always applying it at college or a friend's house.

She began a sexual relationship with an 18-year-old boy, a fellow pupil at William Morris Academy, Fulham, west London, who was from a Lebanese Christian background.

Her schoolwork was suffering and she had a poor attendance record. Three days before the murder, in October last year, her father received an anonymous letter written in Kurdish saying Heshu was behaving like a prostitute.

The letter was sent to the south London offices of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan where Yones was a volunteer worker. Icah Peart, QC, defending, said his client "could not stop brooding on the content of the letter."

Police believe that Yones had been physically abusing Heshu for months beforehand. She had not reported the attacks but referred to them in a two-page "runaway" letter found after her death.

She wrote: "Bye Dad, sorry I was so much trouble. Me and you will probably never understand each other. But I'm sorry I wasn't what you wanted but there's some things you can't change.

"Hay [sic] for an older man you have a good strong punch & kick. I hope you enjoyed testing your strength on me, it was fun being on the receiving end. WELL DONE."

Later in the letter, which detectives think was written weeks before her death, Heshu added: "One day when I have a proper job every penny I owe you will be repaid in full ... I will find a way to independently look after myself.

"I will go to social security to get myself a flat or hostel. I will be ok. Don't look for me because I don't know where I'm going yet. I just want to be alone."

John McGuinness, QC, prosecuting, said Heshu confided in friends her fear that her father would discover she had a boyfriend. In summer 2002 the family visited Kurdistan and Heshu thought her father wanted to arrange a marriage for her.

Mr McGuinness said: "He might then have discovered she had a boyfriend and that she was not a virgin which would make marriage to someone in the Muslim faith difficult if not impossible." On the night of the murder, Heshu's mother had gone out with her 12-year-old brother and left her alone with her father.

Yones attacked her with a kitchen knife, stabbing her 11 times and slitting her throat. He then attempted to cut his own throat and threw himself from the third floor balcony of the family's flat in Acton, west London.

Yones spent four months in hospital under police guard. When interviewed about Heshu's death he said they had been attacked by Islamic extremists who burst into their home.

He also claimed to have been psychologically damaged by repression in Iraq and to have been a victim of a chemical weapon attack. He indicated last week that he was changing his plea but still refused to talk to police.

Police believe that some friends of Yones helped "cover up" the murder and intend to pursue an investigation into attempts to pervert the course of justice.

Officers will re-interview Heshu's mother who they believe has more information about the case than she has disclosed to them so far.

"We know this to be a crime of honour – so-called honour," said Cdr Andy Baker, head of the Metropolitan Police's serious crime directorate. "That is a misnomer. There is no honour in murdering another human being.

"Let this case be a message, loud and clear, to those who misrepresent their own communities and condone or stay silent over the treatment of women in their midst.

"Honour killing is murder and the police and the justice system will come down on you like a ton of bricks if you are found guilty of, or an accomplice to, such crimes of honour."

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B. 'Honour killing' father begins sentence' BBC news online 30 September 2003

'Honour killing' father begins sentence

A Muslim man is beginning a life sentence for murdering his daughter because he disapproved of her Christian boyfriend.

Abdullah Yones admitted stabbing 16-year-old Heshu to death at their home in Acton, west London.

The Old Bailey heard Kurdish Abdalla Yones, 48, murdered Heshu on 12 October 2002 because he feared she was becoming westernised.

He pleaded for the court to pass the death sentence on him for his "appalling" crime after he tried to take his own life.

'Strong punch'

Heshu, who was described as popular and fun-loving, planned to run away from home after starting a relationship with an 18-year-old Lebanese teacher.

In a letter to her parents, apparently showing she planned to run away, Heshu wrote: "Bye Dad, sorry I was so much trouble.

"Me and you will probably never understand each other, but I'm sorry I wasn't what you wanted, but there's some things you can't change.

"Hey, for an older man you have a good strong punch and kick.

"I hope you enjoyed testing your strength on me, it was fun being on the receiving end. Well done."

Yones was a political refugee who fled Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq 10 years ago.

Cut his throat

The court heard that after repeatedly stabbing his daughter and slitting her throat,

Scotland Yard described it as a "brutal honour killing" - a reference to the practice of women being killed by male relatives to redeem the family name.

he cut his own throat and jumped from a third floor balcony.

Detective Inspector Brent Hyatt said: "There was nothing, nothing at all 'honourable' about her murder.

"After hacking his daughter to death, Mr Yones has attempted every defence, from psychiatric, and diminished responsibility to extreme provocation, in order to save his own skin."

He added that Yones first claimed al-Qaeda members had broken into the flat, murdered Heshu and then attacked him. He only admitted murdering her last Monday.

Yones's counsel, Icah Peart QC, said his client wanted to be sentenced to death.

Judge Neil Denison said Yones had tried to commit suicide twice but told him he would pass the only sentence he could for murder - life imprisonment.

He added: "This is, on any view, a tragic story arising out of irreconcilable cultural differences between traditional Kurdish values and the values of western society."

But Scotland Yard warned the sentence should be a warning to those who condone or stay silent about the mistreatment of women in their communities.

Commander Andy Baker added: "Violence in the name of culture will not be tolerated. Murder in the name of honour will be punished by the severest penalties available in law."

Scotland Yard believe there were 12 'honour killings' in the UK last year and said they were not restricted to Muslims, but also occurred in Sikh and Christian families.

A specialist police unit is researching the practice but police say only a handful of people believed 'honour killings' were an appropriate cultural response.

Mr Baker said people who had tried to shield Abdalla Yones from police could now be investigated on suspicion of perverting the course of justice.

"We are completely satisfied that some members of the community, or his friends, tried to assist him in that cover-up," he said.

"It's not about one person committing the murder, it's about the few that acknowledge it and support it and are involved in it."

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Appendix 2 Two examples of Good practice

A. Nick Britten 'Cousins in 'honour killing' face life for knifing bride' The Telegraph 16 October 2003

B. 'Cousin guilty of bride's murder' BBC news online 15 October 2003

A.

Nick Britten 'Cousins in 'honour killing' face life for knifing bride' The Telegraph 16 October 2003

Cousins in 'honour killing' face life for knifing bride

By Nick Britten

(Filed: 16/10/2003)

Two men were facing life in jail last night after stabbing their 21-year-old cousin to death on her wedding day because they disagreed with her choice of husband.

Sahjda Bibi was [knifed 22 times](#) by Razaqat Hussain minutes before the ceremony was due to start. He was incensed that she had broken with family tradition and chosen to marry a divorcee, and felt she was dishonouring the family.

His cousin, Tafarak Hussain, 26, acted as the getaway driver but was also convicted of murder after the jury decided that they had planned the attack together. It was the third highly publicised case in as many weeks involving "[honour killings](#)".

Last night, Miss Bibi's father, Sadkar Khan, 66, said: "There is no justification for attacking a member of our family, a girl of 21. It was a cowardly act by Razaqat and Tafarak on a defenceless and harmless young girl on her wedding day.

"We feel that they should spend the rest of their days behind bars so they cannot do this to anyone else and to serve as a warning to others who might think of committing such a crime."

Miss Bibi, a dressmaker, had been preparing for her wedding at the family home in Alum Rock, Birmingham, on Jan 11 when Razaqat, 38, arrived at the door. He walked upstairs to where Miss Bibi was putting the final touches to her outfit and asked if he could take a photograph of her.

He led her to another bedroom and closed the door before pulling out a kitchen knife and stabbing her 22 times, leaving her dying on the floor in her wedding dress.

Alerted by the screams, Miss Bibi's mother, Allah Raki, ran to the bedroom, where she discovered her daughter covered in blood. Razaqat ran out of the terrace house but was grabbed by the bridegroom, Zaffar Mughal, 29, who had been waiting next door, and other guests who had heard the commotion.

There was a brief struggle, during which Razaqat stabbed the groom and Miss Bibi's brother, Sabreaz, but he managed to wrestle free and jumped into his BMW car, which was driven off by Tafarak.

Tafarak, from Bordesley Green, Birmingham, took Razaqat to meet a taxi driver who drove him to Heathrow Airport, from where he fled to Pakistan. Razaqat went on the run for three months until he was eventually arrested on March 17 after being intercepted by Metropolitan Police officers at Heathrow.

Miss Bibi and Mr Mughal had fallen in love after meeting at a family gathering to celebrate the marriage of Miss Bibi's cousin to Mr Mughal's sister in 2001. Tradition in Miss Bibi's family dictated that the women always marry a first cousin, and because the couple were breaking that custom they were forced to conduct their relationship in secret.

For 18 months they carried out their relationship by text message and telephone calls and only ever saw each other at family gatherings, where they were forced to pretend that nothing was going on. But they were found out in January when she visited his home in Bradford, telling only a close friend where she was going. However the friend told the family and Miss Bibi's parents travelled to Bradford to confront the couple.

Although her parents did not approve - especially as Mr Mughal was a divorcee and had fathered a child - they agreed that she could marry the man she loved and preparations began for a wedding to take place the following week.

However, the day before the ceremony Razaqat, a father of three, found out and was furious that Miss Bibi had cast aside family tradition. He drove from his home in Camberley, Surrey, to his uncle's home in Birmingham, where he stayed overnight. On the way he was involved in a crash on the M40 and initially suspected of drink-driving, although he was released later that afternoon to continue his journey.

At the beginning of the trial at Birmingham Crown Court Razaqat admitted murder but Tafarak denied it. They will both be sentenced on Monday.

Det Insp Adrian Atherley said: "This murder has all the hallmarks of what has become known as an honour killing. But I see no honour in killing another human being. In Sahjda's case it seems she had simply fallen in love with the wrong man."

While still rare, honour killings are becoming more common. Last week Adballa Yones, 48, was jailed for life after he [slit the throat of his 16-year-old daughter](#) because he disapproved of her boyfriend. Mustaq Ahmed, 40, was given the same sentence after he bound, gagged and strangled his teenage daughter's boyfriend after he refused to stop seeing her.

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B.

'Cousin guilty of bride's murder' BBC news online 15 October 2003

Cousin guilty of bride's murder

A taxi firm boss has been found guilty of the murder of his 21-year-old cousin who was stabbed 22 times with a kitchen knife on her wedding day.

Tafarak Hussain, of Mead Crescent, Bordesley, Birmingham, was convicted for helping to organise the attack, which happened in Sahjda Bibi's bedroom in Alum Rock, Birmingham on 11 January this year.

His cousin, Razaqat Hussain, 38, a machine operator from Old Point Close, Camberley, Surrey, had pleaded guilty to murder at an earlier hearing.

Tafarak Hussain, 26, was convicted by the jury at Birmingham Crown Court on Wednesday on the basis that the killing could not have happened without him and that he helped to organise Razaqat Hussain's escape.

Airport getaway

The court had heard how Razaqat Hussain travelled from his work in Camberley, Surrey, to Birmingham on 10 January, where the wedding was due to take place the following day.

The jury was told that the cousins met the next morning and began finalising details of the killing.

Tafarak Hussain then drove his cousin to the house where the celebrations were expected to start, the court heard.

"In a few moments what, in other circumstances, might have been a very happy day was shattered in a most brutal fashion," Timothy Raggatt QC told the jury.

The court heard that the final stages of the attack were witnessed by the bride's mother.

Tafarak Hussain then helped his cousin to escape to Pakistan by driving him away from the murder scene and arranging for a taxi driver to ferry him to Heathrow Airport.

Family applaud verdict

It was said in court that the men were unhappy their cousin, a dressmaker, was marrying Zaffar Mughal, who was not a blood relative.

Tafarak Hussain showed no emotion as the jury foreman returned the panel's 10-2 majority verdict.

After remanding him in custody, the judge, Mr Justice Wakerley, addressed members of the victim's family in the public gallery, telling them: "To those who grieve, the loss of Sahjda, this court extends its sympathy."

In a statement released by West Midlands Police, Sahjda Bibi's parents said: "There is no justification for attacking a member of our family, a girl of 21-years-old.

"It was a cowardly act by Razaqat and Tafarak on a defenceless and harmless young girl on her wedding day.

"We want to thank the police and the prosecution for bringing them to justice."

The family added: "We feel that they should spend the rest of their days behind bars so they cannot do this to anyone else, and to serve as a warning to others who might think of committing such a crime."

Speaking after the case, Detective Inspector Adrian Atherley, of West Midlands Police, said: "Sahjda's death has been called an honour killing, but I can see no honour in killing another human being.

"In this case the victim was a relative of the killer and she seemed to have trusted him."

A West Midlands Police spokesman added: "The death has been called an honour killing - when a person is murdered because they have 'brought dishonour' upon their family.

"In Sahjda's case it seems she had simply fallen in love with the wrong man.

"Razaqat appears to have been unable to accept this union and took it upon himself to prevent it taking place - at any cost."

Despite pleading guilty to murder at a hearing in September, Razaqat Hussain told officers his cousin's death was an accident and has offered no other explanation for the killing.

The cousins, who both face mandatory life sentences, will be sentenced by Mr Justice Wakerley on Monday.

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ⁱ Sue Clough and Sean O'Neil 'Muslim cut his daughters throat for taking a Christian boyfriend' The Telegraph 30 September 2003

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- ⁱⁱ 'Honour killing' father begins sentence' BBC news online 30 September 2003
- ⁱⁱⁱ 'Honour killing' father begins sentence' BBC news online 30 September 2003
- ^{iv} Sue Clough and Sean O'Neil 'Muslim cut his daughters throat for taking a Christian boyfriend' The Telegraph 30 September 2003
- ^v Sue Clough and Sean O'Neil 'Muslim cut his daughters throat for taking a Christian boyfriend' The Telegraph 30 September 2003
- ^{vi} Sue Clough and Sean O'Neil 'Muslim cut his daughters throat for taking a Christian boyfriend' The Telegraph 30 September 2003
- ^{vii} 'Honour killing' father begins sentence' BBC news online 30 September 2003
- ^{viii} Sue Clough and Sean O'Neil 'Muslim cut his daughters throat for taking a Christian boyfriend' The Telegraph 30 September 2003
- ^{ix} Nick Britten 'Cousins in 'honour killing' face life for knifing bride' The Telegraph 16 October 2003
- ^x 'Cousin guilty of bride's murder' BBC news online 15 October 2003
- ^{xi} Despite this assertion, the MPS have stated that they are in the process of learning regarding so-called 'honour killings' to the extent that the utility or even accuracy of the name may be deeply questionable by their own admission. These concerns were recently reflected in the changing of the name of the task force in charge of such investigation by Commander Andy Baker, head of the Metropolitan Police's serious crime directorate from 'Honour Killings Task Force' to 'The Task Force dealing with murders sometimes called 'honour killings'.'