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Anthropology Theories Analysis

“A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness,” is a short documentary film by the Pakistani activist and filmmaker, Sharmeen Obaid- Chinoy. The documentary film, which was released in 2015, is based on a true incident of honor killing. The incident took place the eastern part of the Punjab province of Pakistan, where a girl survived the attempt of killing by her own father and uncle, on the name of honor. The documentary film has highlighted the issues around honor killing in Pakistan, which is an important part of the Pakistani culture. The film has also discussed the cultural, social, religious and legal aspects of the issue and raised the concern that honor killing laws of Pakistan should be amended in order to ensure justice to the victims and survivors of the brutal act. The documentary film won the academy award as well. The honor killing, which is not actually supported by the religions practiced in Pakistan, is an important part of the cultural fabric of Pakistani society and number of victims have to lose their lives due to this brutal practice. The anthropological theories of historical particularism, cultural constructionism, practice theory, and schema theory may prove as the important sources of understanding the cultural practice of honor killing in Pakistani society.

The documentary film sheds light on the suffering and survival of an honor killing survivor, named Saba. She belonged the eastern part of one of the most populated provinces of Pakistan, she belonged to the lower middle class of the society and wanted to get married into a family, which was lower than status as compared to her family. Her parents had initially submitted to her will. However, the intervention of her uncle, the brother of her father, made the situation worse for her as he wanted to get her married in the family of his in-laws and she was not ready for that. She secretly got married to the boy she loved. Her family found out immediately and her father and uncle reached the home of her in-laws, in order to take her back. She was reluctant and afraid of going with them, being aware of the fact that she would be harmed or forced to get a divorce from her husband, however, they swore on the holy book of not harming her, due to which she agreed to go back with them. Her suspicions which had vanished due to their swearing, turned into reality when they stopped the car in the middle of the way and her uncle started slapping and beating her, which was supported by her father as well. She was shot on face, which she luckily was able to dodge due to a sudden tilt of her head and got a severe bruise on her face. She was then thrown into the nearby river, as they thought that she had died. Luckily, she again survived and rose to surface from the river and found help from the nearby gas station. She was then transferred to hospital, where she got the aid for her face injury. After that, she was provided protection by the police force and her father and uncle were arrested. The case then reached the court and she was pressured by different segments of the society to forgive her assaulter, who were her blood relatives. She was not ready to forgive them, however, had to submit to the pressure of the society, due to which the assaulters were released, without being punished for their crime. The documentary later highlighted the fact that her father and uncle had the view that whatever they did was the right thing to do, which has earned them greater respect in society.

According to the historical particularism theory, it is very important to explore the past of the practiced values and traditions in a culture, in order to understand their development. In the case of the victim, as well as a survivor of honor killing, named Saba, it is important to understand the past of the practice and the development of the scenario. Getting married according to her will was the crime of Saba which was forgivable by her family and triggered their honor to the extent that they attempted to kill her. The past of the practice is that young girls and women in the Pakistanis society are not provided the right of getting married to the person of their own choice and it is considered hurtful for the image and honor of her family if any girl does so.

According to anthropology theory of cultural constructionism, it is quite important to learn and explore the beliefs, practices, and values of any culture through different discourses. It states that the individuals and groups participate in the construction of social reality and exploring this is the major purpose of cultural constructionism. In the case of the documentary film, cultural constructionism applies to its aspects in the way that it highlights the status and importance of honor in that particular society. The individual and groups of the society have constructed their social reality that the women are not allowed to get married to the person of their choice, without the permission of her parents, and if she does so, it depicts the breach of their honor. In order to keep their values and traditions intact, they are supposed to kill the person who brings any sort of disrespect or misfortune to their honor. Saba hurt their pride and honor and they found it as the need of the hour to kill her, in order to restore their honor.

The practice theory sheds light on the working of the societies and according to it, if the people of society conform to any practice, then it would be maintained for a long period of time. On the other hand, if they refuse to conform to it, then society would change. In the case of the documentary film, honor killing has been a part of the Pakistani society since a long period of time, which depicts that the society conforms to its practice. It is still practiced in the modern world and the people like Saba, who are the victims and survivors of the situation, do not get the chance of not conforming to such practices due to the pressure of the society. Moreover, criminals do not get punished, which is an important reason for the motivation of other segments of society.

According to schema theory, the practices, values, and traditions of any society are stored in the cognitive learning of the individuals through the culture. In the case of the documentary film, honor killing had been stored in the mind of the general public of the Pakistani society. They think that if the women get married with their own choice and not by the will and permission of the male head of the family, then she deserves to die, as she has undermined the honor of the family. Moreover, the laws of the country also support the act by allowing the victims to forgive the criminals and resolve the issue.

The theories of anthropology provide the opportunity of exploring the cultural issue of honor killing in Pakistani society. The theories highlight the fact that the practice is interwoven in the culture of the society through years of practice and the law also supports it by allowing the right of forgiveness to the criminals. It is presented as an act of valor and bravery, which serves as its promotion while motivating, as well as expecting other people to act in the same manner, if they face the similar issue, which is actually wrong and should not be practiced.