



THIRD WORLD APPROACHES to INTERNATIONAL LAW *Review*

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TWAILR: Reflections ~ 63/2024

The Afterlives of Qandeel Baloch

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On 15 July 2016, Qandeel Baloch, a Pakistani woman best known for her controversial social media presence and frequent television appearances, was strangled to death in her home in Multan, Punjab. She was just 26 years old. Shortly after her death, her brother Waseem admitted to killing Qandeel in retaliation for the controversies she had brought upon their family. Qandeel's death came when international feminist organisations such as Equality Now had already pushed for stricter sentencing for honour crimes in Pakistan. Nearly two decades into the War on Terror, her case would soon become part of a larger political project.

After her death, sensationalist coverage of her life would soon take over. The details of her character, livelihood, and effervescent and vivacious personality would be obscured in favour of two dominant narratives: one that would paint her as somehow deserving of such violence in response to her disrespect for tradition and breaking of patriarchal taboos; and another that would reduce her incredibly complex relationship with her family down to the paradigm of honour crime, wherein she became a flattened victim, killed by a family that was not capable of respecting her humanity.

The tragedies in both framings of her life and the reductivist tendencies these framings carry is worth exploring. Still, in choosing to focus on the second, one can see what work such a framing does for the imperialist project of the United States, what phenomena it presupposes to be natural and culturally endemic, and what forms of violence it endorses, elides, and centres. This reveals much about the very construction of the honour crime and how global legal representations of these frameworks of cultural brutality in the global south can instead belie the kinds

of carceral, punitive impulses that colour feminism in the global north ([a project that anti-carceral feminist scholars have undertaken](#)), and the exportation into these kinds of civilising projects into spaces of imagined pre-modernity.

In the wake of Qandeel's death, Equality Now and other organisations created legal campaigns and petitions, aligning her posthumous legacy with their project of prosecuting honour crime more harshly in the spaces they argued it was culturally endemic. They circulated petitions arguing for the state to take over Qandeel's case and to mandate state prosecution of Qandeel's brother so that 'no man who killed a woman in the name of honour can go free'. These petitions and the broader ideological campaign of these organisations are attractive for three reasons, which I explore below.

First, they assume and legitimise the idea that honour crime is a naturally occurring, endemic phenomenon rather than a colonially informed construction. What defines an honour crime in the first place? [Abu Lughod](#) provides a framework for unseating commonplace assumptions about honour crime as a naturally occurring or culturally fixed crime against women by showcasing how it is a prescribed category with exceptionally muddled boundaries. In many cases, nothing separates an honour crime from other forms of gendered violence other than the cultural and/or religious context within which it occurred. This point is made not to encourage comparative projects of gender-based violence but rather to showcase that every time the spectre of the honour crime is invoked, it is doing some kind of ideological work.

Second, they align Qandeel with their cause, picking details of her life to fit within the confines of a victim, specifically a Muslim woman victimised by a repressive and sexist culture. Not only does this gloss over the power Qandeel had, but it also aligns her with causes she may or may not have supported. Turning Qandeel into the figurehead of a reason to force prosecution for all honour crimes was, thus, an imperially-informed project that, as Dana Olwan notes, is one that Muslim women are all too often aligned with, becoming '[posthumous subjects of solidarity](#)' with causes they cannot consent to.

Third, the work of these organisations showcases how, in the global north and international law-making and enforcement, the feminist agenda is intimately tied to the carceral state. Many scholars, including Angela Davis, Mariame Kaba, and Victoria Law, have highlighted the mainstream feminist movement's collusion with a carceral state to achieve its goals. The goals of mainstream feminism have shifted away from the prevention of gender-based violence and structures that enable it into the ostensibly more achievable and narrow focus of the prosecution of discrete, interpersonal instances of gender-based violence, with the hope of some promised future deterrence. This shift in focus has entailed a long-standing history of mainstream feminist collaboration with the carceral state and internationally with national security regimes. This is, as many have noted, a means

of obscuring the structural gendered violence that states impose, the immense sites of sexual violence that prisons themselves operate as, and a focus on criminalisation that harms women globally. Similarly, the impetus of military intervention to free Muslim women from oppressive societies, in turn, destabilises those societies through all kinds of violence, much of it gendered, with the military itself a locus of sexual violence. One wonders why the feminist agenda is not, instead, to create a world without violence. Or why more attention is not paid to the underlying civilising logic of these campaigns and their colonial inheritances.

Abolitionists attempting to extricate such problematic collusions between feminist agendas and the carceral state, its anti-black violence, and the monopoly on violence it exacts can thus pull lessons from a critical retelling of Qandeel's case using an abolitionist feminist analysis. Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and others who think of abolition as a necessarily transnational project guide these analyses. Such analyses are in conjunction with the framework of TWAIL in their commitment to learning from the ideological work and responsibilities of Qandeel and her life rather than focusing solely on the ideological currents that would sweep up her afterlife. TWAIL feminism and abolitionist feminism, especially, can envision a shared horizon of liberation from gendered violence beyond the state and its various enforcement apparatuses towards local efforts led by those most marginalized by such ideologies, such as the [Freedom for Julie](#) campaign in Pakistan in 2020. This was a campaign led by the Khwaja Sira (an all-encompassing term for transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people in Urdu) for the freedom of trans activist Julie Khan, who was held in a male prison as a result of her political activism and educational videos linking colonialism, transphobia, and state violence. Local freedom campaigns in the Global South, when put in conversation with the freedom projects of groups like [Care Not Cages](#), an abolitionist group focused on freedom for women and mothers incarcerated in California, can set a clear, internationalist, and expansive example of non-carceral approaches to gendered liberation. This project asks critical questions about what lessons abolitionists can learn from a crucial retelling of Qandeel's life and what justice might look like for those like her.