

Concepts of honour

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PERSISTENT reports of "karo-kari" (honour killings) in Pakistan have prompted me to explore the elusive subject of honour. Allow me to begin with a story.

Cynthia is married to John Hardy who is an attorney. She is friendly (non-romantic) with Thomas Beaumont, a neighbour. He has told Cynthia in confidence that his two children from a previous marriage are living with him and his current wife, Betsy, in violation of a court order which had awarded their custody to their mother at the time of his divorce from her. Cynthia has given Thomas her word that she will not disclose this fact to any other person. Thomas is afraid that if his first wife were to discover his whereabouts, she would get him prosecuted for "kidnapping" their children.

Betsy, on her part, wants to be rid of his children and she has quarrelled with him frequently about their future. Then, one morning, when he is out having coffee with Cynthia, Betsy is murdered in her home. In spite of the fact that he has an "alibi" for the time when his wife was presumably killed, the prosecutor's office regards him as a prime suspect. Cynthia is called to testify before a grand jury. The prosecutor asks her if Thomas and his wife were having problems. She says, yes, they had been quarrelling over the children. She is then asked if she knows the reason for the quarrel. She says she does, but cannot reveal it because she had

family, an observer puts it thus: "Suddenly no one sees you. You can walk down the street and everyone is looking the other way. Dressmakers are too busy to see you. Milliners have nothing to suit you. Your tailors can't fit you in. You call on people and the butler tells you nobody is home, even if the lights are on and carriages are parked in the driveway. It is as if you had died, without being aware of it."

Honour may be inherited and it may be acquired. The "pirs" and "makhdooms" in Pakistan have honour, primarily because public veneration of some glorious deed one of their ancestors had done, somewhere along the line, has been carried from one generation to the next. On the other hand, there may be individuals whom the people have invested with honour because they have spent their treasure, or faced dangers and risked their lives, to advance the public good.

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case an equally stern response may be made. ✓

There is no universally valid theory or code of honour. We have to look for one in each community by examining its culture, its professed and operational values. The findings will reveal both commonalities and dissimilarities, even uniqueness, as we go from one culture to the next.

Let us take an example or two. The Viking code in mediaeval Scandinavia expected a man of honour to be valiant, magnanimous, and fair. He exercised self-control, had the courage to declare the truth of a matter regardless of the unpleasantness it might entail, and showed equanimity in the face of physical danger. Treachery would be unthinkable. He regarded the community's respect for his prominence as paramount. He proclaimed and publicly avenged any wrong done to his person or reputation to make it known that his honour had remained unimpaired.

If the aggressor had somehow disappeared from the scene, the intended penalty (death, injury, or loss of possessions) might be visited upon one of his close relatives. The state's inability to punish aggression in private interaction made way for personal retribution. But even if the law forbade it, the community expected the aggressed to go after the offender. Duels were an accepted way of avenging verbal assaults.

References to honour have become less common in modern western societies, but they do nevertheless continue to surface. Drawing upon

accounts of British culture in the late nine-

says she does, but cannot reveal it, because she had given her word never to disclose it to anyone, and that she was honour-bound to keep her promise.

Cynthia is told that her refusal to tell what she knows constitutes contempt of the grand jury for which she will go to jail and stay there until she is ready to relent. She opts to go to jail rather than break her word.

Mr Hardy is tormented by the suspicion that his wife has been having an affair with Mr Beaumont, but he does not question her about it, because he feels that if she is indeed romantically involved with another man, she is honour-bound to let him know and ask for a divorce. He is patiently waiting for her to do so and, in the meantime, he is filing a writ of habeas corpus to get her out of jail. She, on the other hand, does not tell him anything because there is nothing to tell.

What is honour? That is a question easier asked than answered. The word suggests an alluring, seductive, almost romantic content. It seems to have some proximity to words such as respect, esteem, dignity, prestige, veneration, fame, face, shame, and glory. It does not comprehend all of a society's moral code. Indeed, it dictates, in certain situations may even contravene, law or traditional morality.

It has both subjective and objective dimensions. It is personal in the sense that it refers to certain qualities and attitudes that, in a man's self-perception, together constitute the essence of his being more distinctly than any other qualities and attitudes do. Yet, this mix cannot be chosen without reference to the social environment in which he lives and functions. Its worthiness must be recognized at least by his peers.

It is not enough for someone to claim and assert honour; others must allow it to him if it is to have any functional significance. These others will expect him to act in certain ways in given situations; want of the expected action will result in loss of honour. Conduct regarded as dishonourable may cause a man, and even his family, to be placed beyond the pale.

Speaking of the consequences for the man's

Beyond the general category of "gentlemen," the requirements of honour may vary, depending on one's role or station in society. A judge is honourable so long as he decides cases before him without fear or favour.

A physician or a lawyer is not to divulge information he has received from a patient or a client. A soldier is expected to be brave in the face of threat to his life and limb; running away from battle is dishonourable. But no such thing is expected of a merchant. It is both unlawful and dishonourable for a higher-ranking police officer to hush up a crime in return for a bribe but the same conduct, while illegal, may not be dishonourable on the part of a lowly constable.

It is dishonourable for a teacher to dismiss his classes without cause and for students to cheat in examinations. A code of honour, adopted by the US Air Force Academy in 1956, requires cadets to pledge that they will not lie, steal, or cheat, that they will not tolerate anyone among them committing these acts, and that they will do their assigned duty. A cadet's word is taken as true at all times.

An individual's honour, and that of the group to which he belongs, are usually connected, especially in that its loss is often socially determined more than it is self-determined. It is likely that a young woman, who is chatting and holding hands with a young man covertly, does not think she is doing anything wrong. But if she is discovered, her family and tribe will probably feel that she has not only dishonoured herself but them as well.

A man's sense of honour will come into play when someone says or does something that is calculated to diminish his self-perceived, or externally bestowed, station. The challenge is taken as an insult to which he must respond if he is to maintain his honour. The offence may be as slight as a shove while walking in a crowded alley. But if an apology is not immediately forthcoming, a reprisal (in the old days a duel) may be in order. The challenge may come as an allegation of conduct unbecoming a gentleman (cowardice, cheating), in which

surface. Drawing upon accounts of British culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I gather that a man of honour in that setting would never cheat at cards, and he would pay his gambling debts (called debts of honour) promptly. He would not betray a friend, meaning among other things that he would speak no incriminating words about his friends to anyone; not even to law enforcement agencies.

You invaded his honour if you hit him, called him a liar, or insulted a woman who might be under his care and protection. He was loyal both to his superiors and to his subordinates, and he did not even want to take that which did not rightfully belong to him. If an officer, he would deem it unforgivable to take credit for another man's act of courage. He did what he considered to be the right thing to do regardless of consequences. He did not lose self-control and avoided emotional confrontations and outbursts. Most reluctant to be intrusive, he respected the other man's entitlement to privacy.

It is not to be inferred from the above characterization that even during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (let alone the present time) every Englishman was a man of honour. We can be sure that England, like much of the rest of the world, has always had its share of devious politicians, unethical lawyers, deceiving merchants, corrupt public officials; and all kinds of other swindlers, cheats and liars.

In a great many cultures — particularly the Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and South Asian — honour in some of its critical aspects is bound up with the chastity of women. Next Sunday we will try to see if we can identify any Pakistani concepts and codes of honour and discuss the honour-related killings of women here and elsewhere.

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