



# The Coloniality of Contemporary Human Rights Discourses on ‘Honour’ in and Around the United Nations

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## Abstract

In United Nations (UN) human rights reporting and analysis, ‘honour’ has been systematically conflated with ‘honour-related violence’ (HRV). However, honour and HRV are not the same thing. In this article I examine contemporary UN human rights discourses around honour. I argue that these discourses are underpinned by racialised and orientalist-colonial imaginaries which falsely categorise people and places as either having or not having honour. This conflation presents honour as a cultural problem attributed to racialised communities mostly associated with the Muslim World. Adopting a critical post- and de-colonial perspective, I undertake a discourse analysis of UN human rights documents to expose orientalist tropes that reproduce epistemic and material violence against honour. There are three strategies employed to commit this violence: first, through the reduction of honour to physical and emotional HRV—a violence predicated upon the logic of coloniality and the orientalist division of the world into modern and pre-modern states; second, by associating honour as violence with Muslims and migrant communities, the discourse furthers structural Islamophobia; third, by reproducing colonial saviour narratives that designate honour as control over women’s sexuality. The human rights discourse on honour forecloses upon alternative ways of understanding what honour *is* and *means* for those who live with it. As such, the international human rights discourse on honour extends the coloniality of power and the geopolitics of knowledge.

**Keywords** Coloniality · Dignity · Honour · International human rights · Islamophobia · United Nations

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## Introduction

The phenomenon of ‘honour’ has been a major area of concern for international human rights advocates and institutions in recent years. Honour has equally captivated mainstream human rights, the media, and public attention around the world (Hildebrandt 2002; Nordland 2014; McVeigh 2020). This curiosity about honour is, however, negatively charged. It is premised upon a conception of honour as a form of evil against women that has been tied to representations about the violent (Muslim) ‘Other’, their ‘bad culture’ and ‘religion’ (Abu-Lughod 2015; Volpp 2000, 2019). The discursive articulation that underpins international human rights discourses on honour, including its condemnatory language towards the concept, is tied to how honour has been associated with acts of violence (most often, but not exclusively, against women) which discursively circulate under the name of honour, namely honour-related violence (HRV).<sup>1</sup> In this way, honour is viewed as the precondition of an explicitly ‘harmful practice’—that of HRV.<sup>2</sup> The effect of such an articulation is that any discussion of honour is conflated and reduced to a discourse on harm, or more fundamentally, on violence. As a result, other epistemologies of what it means to live with honour are excluded. Discourses of patriarchy, harm, and cultural pathology have instead defined honour as an archaic problem in need of management and eventual elimination so that the benefits of ‘progressive’ and universal human rights can be experienced by all. The international human rights discourse on honour, I argue, demonstrates the neo-colonial politics of sexuality and race of the United Nations (UN) apparatus in relation to different ways of *knowing* and of *being human* (cf. Wynter 2006; Quijano 2007).

‘Honour’ is not straightforwardly perceived as negative for those female subjects who live with it. Honour, rather, is a distinct and meaningful *way of life* (cf. Foucault 1990; Mahmood 2012) which manifests in a plurality of ways that are experienced as a form of “right living” (Baxter 2007, 742). The analysis which follows begins with an understanding of honour as an everyday mode of living (Abu-Lughod 1986) different from the representation of honour *qua* HRV—as found within the discourse of international human rights. As I demonstrate below, international human rights discourse does not attend to how the subject of honour is constituted, but instead foregrounds its supposedly violent nature. This article further illustrates the coloniality of the prevailing knowledge systems of international human rights and its racial and gendered underpinnings. Through the universal codes of international human rights law, the coloniality of power/knowledge narratively constructs honour via practices of categorisation, exclusion and othering that justify the regulation and governance of both honour and its female subject (cf. Kapur 2018).

<sup>1</sup> This article examines the human rights discourse on ‘honour’ within the international human rights arena. Henceforth, when referring to ‘human rights discourse’, it is international human rights to which I am referring.

<sup>2</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Committee (CEDAW) and Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee). Joint Recommendation No 31/General Comment No 18: harmful practices. (4 November 2014) UN Doc CEDAW/C/GC/31-CRC/C/GC/18, para. 29–30.

Whilst the coloniality of human rights approaches and frameworks have been highlighted in existing work (see Grewal 2005; Abu-Lughod 2015; Kapur 2005, 2018), this article critically explores, for the first time, the coloniality of international human rights discourses in relation to the concept of ‘honour’. By human rights discourse, I refer to a generalised system of meaning with particular ways of speaking and thinking about honour that are irreducible to, and in excess of, the UN. International human rights discourse imagines, sustains, and reproduces the subject of honour as the colonial ‘Other’ whose subjectivity must be eradicated through regulation and management. In this article, I argue that international human rights discourse reproduces epistemic and symbolic violence towards the lived phenomenon of honour and its gendered subjects. It does this through three strategies: firstly, through the reduction of honour to physical and emotional HRV—shaped by coloniality as well as the artificial and orientalist division of the world into modern and pre-modern states; secondly, through the association of honour as violence with Muslims and migrants, which is used to further structural Islamophobia; finally, by reproducing colonial saviour narratives, human rights discourse mistakes honour as a form of control over women’s sexuality.

In the aftermath of 9/11, honour emerged most obviously as a political and humanitarian problem alongside an extension of anti-Muslim sentiment on a global scale (Abu-Lughod 2011, 28; Grewal 2013, 8). Although honour and HRV were flagged as a “harmful practice” in 1984 by the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, it was female genital cutting which became the priority issue for feminist activists and legal campaigners (Connors 2005, 29). It was not until the 1990s that honour and HRV were problematised and became part of mainstream international human rights law reporting by among others the CEDAW Committee and through the Beijing +5 Political Declaration and Outcome document (Connors 2005, 35).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the following statement by a former Special Rapporteur on violence against women (VAW) in 2007 expresses a normalised and sedimented view of honour-as-HRV:

Cases of *HRV* are characterized by various specificities. They often involve a collective threat as several family members (sometimes including women) collude to subjugate the victim. A violent escalation can occur quite unexpectedly or take place long after the *honour crisis* was seemingly resolved.<sup>4</sup>

Such an association with violence places limits upon other ways of knowing honour and negates any understanding of how millions of women live with honour as central element of their everyday—as a ‘way of life’ which they have a deep embodied and affective relationship to (cf. Foucault 1990; Mahmood 2012). The dominant

<sup>3</sup> CEDAW Committee. General Recommendation No 19: Violence against women. (11th session 1992) UN Doc A/47/38, para. 24 (r); UN Women. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Beijing +5 Political Declaration and Outcome. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration#view>. Accessed 29 August 2022, Chapter IV para. 69 (e) and 96 (a).

<sup>4</sup> UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Mission to the Netherlands, report by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Yakin Ertürk. (7 February 2007) UN Doc A/HRC/4/34/Add.4, para. 49, emphasis mine.

discourse on honour has rather approached this phenomenon through second-order questions which take for granted certain narratives or ‘authoritative’ facts and statements about the meaning and value of honour. As this is the ground upon which any discussion of honour begins, any deeper questions about what it entails for those living with it, or how it has been constructed as a problem and for whose benefit, are ignored. It is, therefore, urgent to attend to the onto-epistemology of international human rights law as it constitutes itself as the discourse of truth about honour, demanding that the subject of honour transforms and assimilates to its Eurocentric modality of being (cf. Wynter 2006). There is an urgent need to engage with the human rights discourse as it shapes and frames the understanding and moral dispositions of the entire world towards practices of honour. As a meaning-making form of power, human rights emerge from, and are deployed in, the service of colonial sensibilities, which extend beyond the human rights culture itself. It does so in order to racialise and thereby manage certain subjects and cultures. To this end, it has been well established by a number of critical post-colonial scholars (Kapur 2018; Madhok 2021) that human rights discourse is neither neutral nor innocent. Rather, it has been hegemonised along neo-liberal and Eurocentric terms and is in need of critical interrogation as it thereby furthers relationships of domination and global inequality.

This article proceeds, first, by developing an account of the concept of ‘coloniality’ and its role as a central tool through which representations of honour in international human rights discourse. I adopt a discourse analytical framework and critical post-/de-colonial lens to examine the figuring of honour within the discourse of human rights. In so doing, I explore the role of coloniality in the representation of honour and how this sets the parameters of the human. I use this insight to analyse three strategies through which honour is represented within human rights discourse. I conclude that there is a need for further research on honour and its relation to human rights, which breaks with the authority given to international human rights discourse and thus attends to those heretofore excluded voices which live with and through practices of honour.

## **Othering, Racialising, and Sexualising ‘Honour’ in International Human Rights Discourse**

In its efforts to understand and make sense of practices it names as honour international human rights discourse has engaged in processes of othering, racialisation and sexualisation. Such operations of power are simultaneously harmful and productive of a new truth about honour. At the centre of this approach for *telling the truth* about honour, human rights discourse exercises a distinct form of epistemic power over those who live with honour. Such a power proceeds by introducing new categorisations, measures, and terms through which honour is to be understood and governed. These techniques include the drawing of class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, and racial hierarchies, all of which are premised upon the “modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system” (Grosfoguel 2007, 213). At stake here is an operation of what decolonial theorists have described as the “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2007, 171) or “colonial difference” (Mignolo 2000, 13). The concept of coloniality

was developed by the South American theorist Anibal Quijano during the 1990s and it addresses how the operations of power established under colonial rule continue to govern peoples and communities in the Global South despite the formal ending of the era and institutions of colonialisation (2007, 170–1). Central to the “coloniality of power” is the systematic repression of the knowledges of other cultures and the positing of cultural Europeanisation as an aspirational goal for those colonised peoples (Quijano 2007, 169). Whilst the role of ‘coloniality’ inherent in international human rights has been illustrated more generally (see Kapur 2018; Madhok 2021), what I argue is that honour, in particular, provides us with a unique vantage point into the material and historical role played by international human rights in extending the logics of coloniality and anti-Muslim racism. As such, this article traces the reductive narrative constitution of honour within human rights discourse at the intersection of the logics of coloniality and structural Islamophobia. I thereby demonstrate how the ‘coloniality of power’ brings into question both the ‘coloniality of knowledge’ (politics of knowledge) as well as the re-making of human subjectivities through the “coloniality of being” (Wynter 2003, 287–288; see also Mignolo 2015, 108).

Within the international human rights discourse on honour, the latter has been framed as ‘Other’ to the values and social ontology of rights. Such a rendering is ironic as the concept of honour has a European bourgeois history that is deeply entangled in the politics of imperialism and colonisation. The dominant mode of being human, that is embodied in the name ‘European’, is portrayed as having already overcome social values of honour to now stand as examples of what can be achieved in a ‘post-honour’ world. However, this rhetoric ignores how honour was, and still is, central and influential to social behaviour in many European countries (Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1992; Oprisko 2012). Honour was also central to British and French colonial laws implemented in the colonised world (Hoyek et al. 2005, 114–9; Warraich 2005, 81–2). The human rights discourse on honour, and its projection of a life ‘post-honour’ produces two (sometimes convergent) concepts of honour: the honour of pre-Enlightenment European bourgeois Man, and the honour of the colonial ‘Other’ (cf. Wynter 2003), both of which are cast as anterior to the time of the dignified subject of human rights in the present. Dignity is central to the understanding of human rights law in the twenty-first century as the normative and ontological foundation upon which human rights is premised (Moyn 2010, 4; Whyte 2019, 27). As an Enlightenment ideal, dignity is believed to have transformed honour following the French Revolution, such that honour was transformed from being a virtue of pride and rank to an egalitarian democratic dignity universal to all (cf. Krause 2002, 13). Dignity is imbued with a particular power, a hierarchical priority over other ontologies, and becomes a signifier for what constitutes the key nodal point in human rights discourse—it marks what is human about the human of human rights. As such, human rights discourse and its subject are oriented towards this monolithic concept of dignity—an ideal which is projected ahistorically and haunted by the temporality of linear progress towards and beyond ‘modernity’ as the era of universal dignity.

What emerges from this problematisation of the human rights discourse on honour in relation to the powerful analytical concept of ‘coloniality’ is a clear sense

in which the subject of honour is represented as a deficient being, falling short of full humanity. Such a projection of humanity, of what it means to be the human of human rights, is a contemporary iteration of what Sylvia Wynter (2003) describes as the over-representation of Man in the place of the human. Central to Wynter's Black genealogy of the human is an understanding of the ways in which colonialism engaged in strategies of dehumanisation and a politics of the human, that saw the projection of European bourgeois conceptions of human in terms of Man (what Wynter differentially calls Man1 and Man2) through racialised *descriptive/prescriptive statements* about the human (the coloniality of being). The result was the decentring and erasure of other 'genres' of being human that belonged to indigenous and colonised subjects. Such an overrepresentation of the human in the genre of Man had the effect of instantiating new limits to the "autopoietic field" within which subjects can performatively (re)fashion themselves as human (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 30). At the centre of the autopoietic field of international human rights discourse is the racialised ideal of dignity (along with its attendant *statements* about the human of human rights) and the relegation of its 'Other': honour.

Subjects of honour are simultaneously represented as exotic and barbaric as they are made an object of study through the colonial and Western gaze (Fanon 1967; Spivak 1988; Said 1993; Quijano 2007). This gaze is orientalist in nature and articulates subjects, cultures, and forms of life in the so-called Orient ('East') as reductive modes of being human (Said 1993). Orientalism, as a concept that names a particular 'style of thought', enables us to understand how, supported by institutions and images in the 'West' (Occident), an imperialistic and geopolitical division of the world in terms of an inferior 'East' characterised by disharmony and chaos is fabricated, sustained, and reproduced. International human rights discourse on honour is exemplary of orientalist modes of analysis, particularly considering how honour as HRV is portrayed as a threat to humanity. Orientalism is a phenomenon that has long been characterised by a fear of Islam and Muslims (cf. Beydoun and Choudhury 2020). This phantasmatic threat is tied to what Abu-Lughod calls "IslamLand", an imaginary space with a religion and culture that has come to stand for women's "nightmares" (Abu-Lughod 2015, 69–73). Within this context, structural Islamophobia has increasingly constituted a core aspect of the agenda of enhancing women's rights as Islam has come to stand for non-modern and non-European modes of being (cf. Razack 2004; Farris 2017).

As a result of this politics of racialisation, the female subjects living with and through honour are narrated into being for human rights discourse, in terms of their universal victimisation. Such a representation (the coloniality of knowledge) depicts the female subject of honour as lacking agency and the ability to live, construct, and narrate their own ways of being. This way of framing the scene, as examined below, renders international human rights law as, purportedly, the *only* way to living a life of freedom. In this very specific sense, international human rights discourse reproduces the colonial-saviour narrative that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) refers to as "white men [and women] saving brown women from brown men" (296). Spivak's famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak' examined how the practice of *sati* (widow-burning) portrayed women through two narratives: first, through the imperial discourse in which women were oppressed and in need of being saved; and second,

through a nativist discourse in which the women of *sati* ‘wanted to die’ (1988, 278). What is lost, however, through the failure to allow these women to speak for themselves, is the possibility of knowing their truth in relation to the practice of widow-burning. The question of ‘representation’ is not a neutral one insofar as it is always a matter of re-presenting, of presenting on behalf of an ‘Other’ who does not get to speak (Spivak 1988). This representation happens within dominant epistemologies and, with each reiteration of the representation, such a voice is transformed further from its initial point of enunciation, thus constituting something that is always more or less than what its previous iteration entailed (cf. Derrida 2016, 181). Similarly, honour in international human rights discourse renders mute those women living with and through honour. As such the human rights project’s commitment to saving these women is underpinned by a desire to transform the subjectivity of those living with honour so that it aligns (mimics) more closely (but perhaps, never completely) to that of the European bourgeois liberal rights-bearing subject (Bhabha 1984, 126). Controlling women, their sexuality, as well as their genitals was central to colonisation as “colonial conquest had both land and genitals as its target” (cf. Fanon 1967; Hodžić 2017, 51). Such a sensibility is also visible today as sexuality is a key part of a “developmental narrative” (Dhawan 2016, 53–4) that marks the progress and ‘modernisation’ of peoples, cultures, and countries towards ‘liberation’ and neo-liberal equality (Repo 2016).

The purported ‘illiberalism’ and inhumanity tied to honour is sought to be eradicated through two avenues. First, outside of Western nation-states this is happening through bringing “good governance” and human rights to the benefit of otherwise “helpless victims” (cf. Kapur 2018, 38). Second, within Western borders it is achieved through harsh migration laws which can hold the “sexual-deviant-terrorist” at bay, thus preventing them from infiltrating the “pure” community, keeping White and Muslim women as safe in return (Ticktin 2008, 864; Kapur 2018, 37–8; Volpp 2019, 133). Central to this second avenue is an attendant “deculturalisation” (Razack 2004, 131) of Muslim migrants who must assimilate and refigure themselves and their subjectivity as ‘modern’ citizens in the West. The West’s self-referential authority through which it decides what is best for Muslims, particularly women, reproduces the binary mode of thinking between human rights and honour/Islam along with several other false binaries such as modern/pre-modern, traditional/secular, free/oppressed, and agency/coercion.

This solution to the ‘problem’ of honour is supposedly found, not only through sanction and criminalisation, but also through legal frameworks which can “ensure the protection and promotion of human rights”.<sup>5</sup> International human rights discourse clearly states that the harmful practice of honour can be prevented through an awareness of rights. In this way, knowing your rights equates with knowing your ‘true’ desires, a point sedimented in the following statement by the CEDAW and CRC Committees, and their authoritative report on harmful practices and what they call “crimes committed in the name of so-called honour”:

<sup>5</sup> CEDAW and CRC Committees, *supra* n 2, para. 12.

States parties have an obligation to *challenge and change patriarchal ideologies* and structures that *constrain women and girls from fully exercising their human rights and freedoms*. For girls and women to overcome the social exclusion and poverty that many experience, which increase their vulnerability to exploitation, harmful practices and other forms of gender-based violence, they need to be equipped with the *skills and competencies necessary to assert their rights*, including to *make autonomous and informed decisions and choices* about their own lives. In this context, education is an important tool for empowering women and girls to claim their rights.<sup>6</sup>

Human rights discourse thus sees itself as saving women from cultures of honour and other harmful practices. Reading this in decolonial terms, reveals how what is at stake here is the articulation of a mode of being human, a descriptive/prescriptive statement (Wynter 2003), towards which international human rights discourse expects subjects of honour to aspire to mimic, embody and achieve. In this way, international human rights discourse limits the greater possibilities and meanings of living with honour and obscures the ways in which honour remains prevalent as a regulator of social behaviour in European countries today.

Against this background, there is a vital need to understand honour in its wider social, political, and historical context—an agenda that my critical post-/de-colonial approach facilitates. By undertaking such a contextualised approach, it is then possible to make the critical and conceptual space needed to provide alternative accounts to the dominant narrative that human rights discourses in and around the UN proliferate through an operation of the coloniality of knowledge about honour. Counter-narratives (Said 1993) are needed as the power of narration essentially maintains the link between imperialism and cultures and function to block other narratives from forming (cf. Wynter 1987). In the next section, I explain the methods I used to demonstrate empirically how the lens of the “coloniality of power” helps to render more transparent the “coloniality of knowledge” (epistemology) and “coloniality of being” (ontology) at stake in international human rights discourse on honour (cf. Mignolo 2018, 154).

## A Note on Methodology

The analysis which follows is an examination of the discourse on honour as traced in over 50 reports and documents of various international human rights institutions (UN related). I constructed this corpus through two types of searches. First, I used the UN Charter Body and the UN Treaty Bodies databases searching for the keywords “honour”, “honour-related violence”, “honour-based violence/crime”, “honour-related killings” and “crimes of honour”.<sup>7</sup> I also undertook a content analysis

<sup>6</sup> CEDAW and CRC Committees, *supra* n 2, para. 61, emphasis mine.

<sup>7</sup> The concepts relating to honour and violence are used interchangeably in UN reporting. I use honour and HRV as two different concepts although the human rights discourse uses them interchangeably.



based on document searches with regards to the reports of the CEDAW Committee and the Special Rapporteur(s) on VAW during the period from 1990 to 2020. I drew further on historical sources from the earlier and more intense period of reporting on honour—a period that began just before the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>8</sup> The more recent reporting is subtle in its framing and relies upon the claims and knowledge produced through earlier phases of reporting on honour over the past 30 years which have now become naturalised within the truth-regime of human rights discourse. These reports and documents, including general recommendations as well as country and thematic reports are taken as expressive of the dialogues and struggles between a variety of human rights actors including, human rights defenders, civil society groups, non-governmental organisations (NGO)s, academics, and states. In this sense, I take them to be *exemplary statements* that are representative of more generalised logics and ways of thinking (cf. Foucault 1969) about honour within the international human rights arena. I do not claim that the representation of honour within the corpus constructed here is total or final in nature, but simply indicative, and part of an ongoing critique (cf. Naqvi 2022, 517).

The institutional knowledge production on honour is deeply troubling, not only for the above-mentioned reasons but also because of how much of the academic literature on HRV follows a similar pattern. Andrzej Kulczycki and Sarah Windle's (2011) systematic review of the literature on HRV notes that there is a tendency to duplicate material—both commentaries and data—in this field of research, thus expanding the perceived magnitude of the phenomenon. I have detected a similar tendency in UN reporting on honour.

The discourse analysis of the corpus of texts and statements examines the relationship between power/knowledge about honour and its operationalisation and integration within the apparatus of human rights. I coded the documents thematically and identified the common tropes and representations of honour. This required reading and re-reading each of the documents intertextually, to identify patterns of meaning. I found that international human rights discourse, as exemplified in the corpus I was working with, created a system of meaning around honour, through statements that sought to define the practice and its significance. My discourse analytical approach focused on key concepts and ideas, and the ways in which their meaning is disclosed by examining their relation to each other within the text and its (post-)colonial context. This mode of analysis helped to show how meaning is constituted by excluding certain facts and objects, thus destabilising the ahistorical and universal meanings assumed as 'natural' within international human rights discourse on honour.

<sup>8</sup> The following two compilations were helpful in providing an overview of the scale in which honour was addressed by human rights bodies up until 2013: CIMEL/INTERRIGHTS 2003; D'Acunto 2013.

In the following sections I outline the three dominant strategies international human rights deploy in relation to honour. These strategies were, firstly, that honour is reduced to physical and emotional violence as HRV, a reduction largely influenced by the colonial-oriental division of the world into modern and pre-modern states and cultures. Second, I shed light upon how the historical accounts and association of honour with Islam haunts any discussion on honour. Third, I elucidate how the narrative of women as victims and sexually unliberated reproduces the colonial saviour complex. These strategies are overlapping and deeply intertwined and are only separated here for analytical purposes.

## Reducing Honour to Violence

The first strategy through which human rights discourse exercises epistemic and symbolic violence against honour is through its orientalist (and thereby othering) mistranslation as inherently violent. The injury arising from this mistranslation is performed, first, by reducing the understanding of honour to violent practices, and second, by conflating a number of practices into a meta-category where it is not obvious what makes them constitute this object called honour once aggregated together. During a six-minute promotional video from 2010 with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay, she states that, “In the name of preserving so-called *family honour*, women and girls are shot, stoned, burned, buried alive, strangled, smothered and knifed to death with horrifying regularity.”<sup>9</sup>

Such a sensationalist description of honour has been repeated in 2012 by then Special Rapporteur on VAW, Rashida Manjoo:

*Honour killings* take many forms, including direct murder; stoning; women and young girls being forced to commit suicide after public denunciations of their behaviour; and women being disfigured by acid burns, leading to death. Honour crimes are also linked to other forms of *family violence*, and are usually committed by male family members as a means of *controlling women’s sexual choices* and limiting their freedom of movement. Punishment usually has a collective dimension, with the family as a whole believing it to be injured by a woman’s actual or perceived behaviour, and is often public in character. The visibility of the issue and the punishment also serves a social objective, namely, influencing the conduct of other women.<sup>10</sup>

And again, some five years later, in 2017, Dubravka Šimonovic (Special Rapporteur on VAW) wrote that honour (not HRV) is linked to:

<sup>9</sup> UN NEWS. 2010. Impunity for domestic violence, ‘honour killings’ cannot continue – UN official. 4 March, *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2010/03/331422>. Accessed 19 August 2022, emphasis mine.

<sup>10</sup> UNHRC. Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Rashida Manjoo. (23 May 2012) UN Doc A/HRC/20/16, para 45, emphasis mine.

The Special Rapporteur notes that many forms of gender-based violence are linked to ‘honour’, including femicide or gender-related killings of women, forced marriage, imprisonment, rape, incest, domestic violence and suicide [...].<sup>11</sup>

These sentiments are shared through the reporting of the CEDAW Committee—an entity of the UN that together with the Special Rapporteurs on VAW carries great weight in developing and furthering knowledge and policies with regards to women’s rights and status. The CEDAW Committee expresses that “gender-based violence takes multiple forms, including acts and omissions intended or likely to cause or result in death [...]” as it elaborates upon this death in the following terms: “These deaths include, inter alia, murders, killings in the name of so-called ‘honour’ and forced suicides.”<sup>12</sup>

Honour is further portrayed as constituting an evidentiary issue in terms of the ‘*defence of honour*’ as it allows for reduced sanctions or impunity in some legal systems:

Discriminatory evidentiary rules and procedures, including procedures allowing for women’s deprivation of liberty to protect them from violence, practices focused on ‘virginity’ and legal defences or mitigating factors based on culture, religion or male privilege, *such as the so-called ‘defence of honour’*, traditional apologies, pardons from victims/survivors’ families or the subsequent marriage of the victim/survivor of sexual assault to the perpetrator, *procedures that result in the harshest penalties, including stoning, lashing and death being often reserved to women, as well as judicial practices that disregard a history of gender-based violence to the detriment of women defendants.*<sup>13</sup>

The understanding of honour as expressed by the institutions of the Special Rapporteur on VAW and the CEDAW Committee renders it as barbaric, severely violent and resulting in death for women. It is difficult to comprehend here what exactly is meant by honour within the human rights discourse, but it is evidently represented as both inhumane and non-modern. Honour is considered as a form of ‘ideology’, representing it as an epistemic falsity with human rights as its non-ideological counterpoint.<sup>14</sup> Through such a racialising gaze, international human rights discourse perpetuates false hierarchical juxtapositions of pre-modern/modern and coercion/agency, family/individuality, traditions/secularity. In doing so, it furthers an image of honour cultures and subjects as inherently irrational, both in their disregard of

<sup>11</sup> UNHRC. Mission to Occupied Palestinian Territory/State of Palestine, by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Dubravka Šimonović. (8 June 2017) UN Doc A/HRC/35/30/Add.2, para 24, emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No 35: gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No 19. (14 July 2017) UN Doc CEDAW/C/GC/35, para 14, footnote 17.

<sup>13</sup> CEDAW Committee, General Recommendation No 35, *Supra* n 12, para. 29c. See also CEDAW and CRC, *Supra* n 2, para 29, emphasis mine.

<sup>14</sup> UNHRC. 15 years of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences (1994–2009): A critical review, by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Yakin Ertürk. (27 May 2009) UN Doc A/HRC/11/6/Add.5, para 96.

gender-based violence but also in their supposed inclination to use violence, reducing them to a state of *animality* (Fanon 1967). International human rights discourse prescriptively announces that subjects of honour ought to take distance from what is not necessarily violent but a ‘way of being’ which is associated and reduced with violence: honour. At stake is a neo-colonial politics of being.

In addition, honour forms part of the generic concept of ‘harmful practices’. According to the 2014 Joint General Recommendation by the CEDAW and CRC Committees, this category includes “female genital mutilation”, “child and/or forced marriage”, “polygamy”, and “crimes committed in the name of so-called honour” which are all referred to as “*endemic*”.<sup>15</sup> Represented as a disease spreading in particular communities, including “regions or countries in which they had not been previously documented, primarily owing to migration”,<sup>16</sup> this category refers to those considered racial defect and racially inferior. ‘Harmful practices’ is a category which came to the rescue of UN bodies as they sought to address female circumcision without alienating African diplomats (Hodžić 2017, 90). The fact that this category of ‘harmful practices’ is non-exhaustive results in legal and conceptual ramifications that move beyond female circumcision, but which are always haunted by the fear associated with this practice. Once viewed through this prism, honour cannot be disconnected from the idea of its practice as inherently violent and as a symptom of cultural, moral, and perhaps even economic, underdevelopment.

What these statements further reveal is the extent to which honour, whether it is ‘family honour’ or ‘the defence of honour’, serves as an umbrella term which stands in for a plurality of practices belonging to diverse cultures, languages, life-worlds and practices. ‘Honour’ is *empty* and constructed as belonging to a pathological ‘Other’ that is represented as less-than-human.<sup>17</sup> The definition of honour ignores the vernacular cultural specificity of the practices it misnames. Such a moment of catachresis is a deliberate imposition of meaning that has flattened out several distinct social practices through sensationalist, racial and colonial descriptions through a single name: honour. Through the orientalist-colonial mistranslation and misnaming, the new meta-concept of honour serves to aggregate several different practices into one catch-all category and to mark them as inherently or necessarily associated with violence (see above: forced marriage, imprisonment, rape, incest, domestic violence and suicide). Through such an operation of the coloniality of knowledge, the fact that there might be great cultural variety in how honour is lived and experienced beyond such practices and points of enunciation is not captured. Honour appears as a universal category with conformity across time, culture, and space, and yet this cultural practice is claimed to be more prevalent in certain parts of the world,

<sup>15</sup> CEDAW and CRC Committees, *supra* n 2, para. 8.

<sup>16</sup> CEDAW and CRC Committees, *supra* n 2, para. 8.

<sup>17</sup> I refer to honour as ‘empty’ here in reference to Laclau’s (2000, 84) concept of the “empty signifier”, a concept or name which is emptied of any determinate content in order to constitute itself as a horizon or suggestive blank space into which situated subjects (here international human rights) can project their own meanings and understandings.

perpetuating the artificial image of the world across lines of non-modernity/modernity, orient/occident, and chaos/stability.

We urgently need to ask whether honour can be fully understood by a system of knowledge which transposes it into the hegemonic language of English and forces it into a specific agenda that leaves no room for alternative forms of it? The problems of translation and misnaming are aggravated through the idea that honour and human rights are fixed entities despite both being in a constant transformation and processes of internal contestation (cf. Benhabib 2002, 102–103). Human rights discourse is portrayed as being superior and rational whereas honour is considered incapable of being transformed and as fixed in time. In this sense, the underpinning logic is that honour cannot be made better and that honour (as represented and understood by international human rights) needs to be eradicated. This comes at the expense of human rights discourse foreclosing for itself, and us, the possibility of knowing honour on the terms, and in the voice and grammar, of those who live with and through it in dignified terms. Within the prevailing epistemology of human rights people living with honour fall beyond the limits of the category of the human, as a full being (Wynter 2006). Consequently, human rights, through its misnaming and misrepresenting, structures which lives are recognised and represented as human and as having humanity.

## **Honour as a Muslim (Migrant) Problem**

The articulations of honour within international human rights discourse is intertwined with structural Islamophobia which extends the hierarchies of the colonial-racial world order through orientalist representations (cf. Grosfoguel 2012, 11–16). Such orientalist depictions demonstrate both the fear and fascination of Islam and the Muslim world. The framing discloses the violent racialisation of the subject of honour which is depicted as unassimilable, degenerate, and enveloped within an inescapable patriarchal culture. The Muslim (migrant) is considered to be infected with the disease of honour, as they constitute a primary scapegoat and obfuscatory device within ‘modern’ European states. The politicised and problematised presence of migrants within the discourse serves to conceal the colonial and exploitative relations that constitute and structure the encounter between the Orient and the Occident, not least, the role of the European colonial powers in “placing those populations under siege both before they leave their homelands and once within Europe’s borders” (Razack 2004, 132). Islamophobia thus renders Muslims and migrants as culturally inferior, and portrays them as both uncivilised and underdeveloped, as well as authoritarian and as potential terrorists.

The association of honour-as-HRV with Islam haunts the debates found within internal human rights reporting and institutions. Prior to the adoption of General Assembly resolution 55/66 in 2001—the first resolution to address the elimination of “crimes against women committed in the name of honour”—a draft resolution

had been brought forward by the representative of the Netherlands.<sup>18</sup> This draft resolution was circulated alongside the screening of the film *Crimes of Honour* at the UN General Assembly. Halima Embarek Warzazi, UN diplomat in the UN Commission on Human Rights (now replaced by the UN Human Rights Council), reported that the film was perceived to equate HRV with Muslims, as it “attributed crimes of honour to Islamic practices and manipulated and distorted Koranic verses to prove its point”.<sup>19</sup> In response to this, a number of Muslim countries and the member states of the Organization of Islamic Conference submitted a letter stating that no such link exists (Connors 2005, 34–5).

The categorisation of honour as inherently Islamic, or as belonging to the Muslim world is made particularly clearly by the then Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Asma Jahangir in 2002:

The practice of ‘honour killings’ is more prevalent although not limited to countries where the majority of the population is Muslim. In this regard it should be noted that a number of renowned Islamic leaders and scholars have publicly condemned this practice and clarified that it has no religious basis. At the same time, it is reported that some Governments of countries where Muslims are in a minority do not take a firm position against such violations of human rights on the pretext of not wanting to hurt cultural sensitivities among the minority population.<sup>20</sup>

Jahangir’s statement is indicative of the tensions and ambivalence underpinning the human rights discourse in relation to Islam and honour. It is clearly expressed that honour is prevalent in the Muslim world but that it is denounced by Islamic leaders to indicate that the problem is not the Islamic religious script but the Muslim culture itself. This latter point is reinforced in relation to the Muslim minorities in (European) countries as they constitute the problem in terms of violating human rights through HRV.

The following statement by former Special Rapporteur Radhika Coomaraswamy in 2002 amplifies this image of honour as belonging to the Orient and its traditional tribal backwardness:

Honour killings in Pakistan (originally a Baloch and Pashtun tribal custom) have recently received international attention. Honour killings are now reported not only in Balochistan, the North-West Frontier Province and Upper Sind, but in Punjab province, as well. They are also reported in Turkey (eastern and south-eastern Turkey but also in Istanbul and İzmir in western Turkey), Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Morocco and other Medi-

<sup>18</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 55/66, Working towards the elimination of crimes against women committed in the name of honour. (31 January 2001) UN Doc A/RES/55/66.

<sup>19</sup> UN Commission on Human Rights. Traditional practices affecting the health of women and the child, report by Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, Halima Embarek Warzazi. (4 July 2001) UN Doc E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/27, para 101–2.

<sup>20</sup> Asma Jahangir (25 January 2000) UN DOC E/CN.4/2000/3, para. 78.

terranean and Gulf countries. It also takes place in countries such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom within the migrant communities.<sup>21</sup>

What is interesting to note here is how honour is as a non-modern and tribal phenomenon, which occurred in a Muslim geography (Pakistan) and spread to other Muslim geographies (Turkey, Jordan, Syria etc.) and found in non-Muslim countries within migrant communities. This sentiment has been repeated by other former Special Rapporteurs on VAW as they have expressed that HRV occurs “with incidence most obvious in South Asia and the Middle East, and diaspora communities”.<sup>22</sup> The definite facts of the geographical space of honour is exemplified through the map of where honour occurs—namely in geographies which are predominantly Muslim or have a significant Muslim population.

The expert group meeting on gender-motivated violence from 2012 exemplifies how honour is to be found in Muslim-majority countries:

Dowry-related killings of women, suicides and self-immolation (South Asia), killings of women as a result of intimate partner violence (Europe), killings of women accused of sorcery and witchcraft (Africa and the Pacific), honour-related killings of women (Middle East and North Africa) and extreme forms of gender-motivated killings of women (femicides) in Latin America were among the different manifestations discussed in this session [...].<sup>23</sup>

Regional categorisations such as these are operations of power that establish taxonomies of violence and construct the world into places of ‘lesser’ and ‘greater’ evil. Whilst dowry-related deaths, suicides and self-immolation are not associated with Muslim communities, HRV is. What is deemed HRV is portrayed to not exist outside of the Middle East and North Africa despite other reports indicating that it also emerges in other places. There is an inconsistency between the above quoted statements, as Pakistan, a Muslim majority country, is associated with South Asia by Manjoo but the root of all HRV according to Coomaraswamy. These contradictions serve to obscure the reality and to misrepresent HRV as a Muslim issue by hiding it amongst other forms of VAW in other regions. Such contradictions further expose the limited knowledge of human rights discourse about honour. What is consistent is the fact that Europe stands as the only place with intimate partner violence that is not ‘extreme’ or motivated by ‘mystical’ and ‘irrational’ values but instead is seen as a distinctly individualised practice born of deviancy or criminality (cf. Razack 2004, 152). This categorisation is utilised to further the ‘colonial difference’

<sup>21</sup> UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective – Violence Against Women, report by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Radhika Coomaraswamy. (31 January 2002) UN Doc E/CN.4/2002/83, para 21.

<sup>22</sup> UNHRC. The Next Step: Developing Transnational Indicators on Violence Against Women, report by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Yakin Ertürk. (25 February 2008) UN Doc A/HRC/7/6/Add.5, para 158.

<sup>23</sup> UNHRC. Summary report on the expert group meeting on gender-motivated killings of women, by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Rashida Manjoo. (16 May 2012) UN Doc A/HRC/20/16/Add.4, para 13.

(cf. Mignolo 2018) which reduces Muslims and their perceived behaviour through an approximation to a reduced mode of being, to that of animality and irrationality. As a result, human experience is divided and aggregated, and this serves to facilitate the management and governance of honour groups, including their religious life and gender relations.

Whilst the Special Rapporteurs are explicit in stating that honour constitutes an issue in certain parts of the world, the CEDAW Committee, however, is more diligent in how they use honour. Although it is most commonly used in relation to Muslim-majority countries or their diaspora communities, the CEDAW Committee use honour in some other contexts too.<sup>24</sup> The UN and its colonial gaze renders Islam and its diasporic nations incompatible with European modernity through the “secular imperative” (Mahmood 2008, 461) which rests upon a false binary between secular and religious/‘traditional’ subjectivities.

To circumvent the issue of Islamophobia, some reports offer a distinction between Islam and cultures and traditions of honour. As an example, the Compilation Report on Afghanistan from 2018, made by the Office of the OHCHR in assisting the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, stated that harmful practices, including honour killings, “were often confused as being aspects of Islamic law or teachings and therefore ingrained in the local traditions”.<sup>25</sup> The distinction between Islam and cultures or traditions practiced by Muslims is superficial, however, as both are caught up in racial, cultural and religious logics of exclusion and power. At a discursive level, it is evident that the association with Islam is quite well established, and that the constant emphasis upon how Islam does not condone HRV is also a performative endeavour which reinforces that which it seeks to abolish, an image of Muslims as violent and barbaric.

It is stated by the CEDAW and CRC Committees that the “endemic” of “harmful practices” which honour forms part of are: “also found in regions or countries in which they had not been previously documented, primarily owing to migration [...]”.<sup>26</sup> The broader problem is that migrants are seen as the border-crossing agents of honour-violence bringing it to Western countries. This image of the migrant as Muslim despite not identifying or necessarily being so (cf. Yilmaz 2016, 9) scapegoats Islam and its supposed pathological nature for enabling honour to re-emerge in Europe. In this respect, the fight against honour, Kofi Annan has suggested, requires the “integration and emancipation of women and girls from ethnic minorities, and

<sup>24</sup> CEDAW Committee. Concluding Observations on Mexico. (7 August 2012) UN Doc CEDAW/C/MEX/CO-7-8, para 13 in which ‘honour’ is mentioned in relation to ‘homicide’ and not ‘family honour’. See also the following reports in which ‘honour’ is addressed as part of a larger structural and legal problem: CEDAW Committee. Concluding Observations on Pakistan. (27 March 2013) UN Doc CEDAW/C/PAK/CO/4, para 22 (b); CEDAW Committee/ Concluding Observations on Iraq. (10 March 2014) UN Doc CEDAW/C/IRQ/CO/4-6, para 25(b-c), 26 (a); CEDAW Committee. Concluding Observations on Turkey. (25 July 2016) UN Doc CEDAW/C/TUR/CO/7, para 30(b), 34-35.

<sup>25</sup> UNHRC. Compilation on Afghanistan report by the OHCHR (15 November 2018) UN Doc A/HRC.WG/6/32/AFG/2, para. 45. See also: UNHRC, Rashida Manjoo, *Supra* n 10.

<sup>26</sup> CEDAW and CRC Committees, *supra* n 2, para 8.



to enhance their awareness of their rights”.<sup>27</sup> In a recent more report on Norway, the CEDAW Committee explicitly refers to “minority and migrant women” and their lack of awareness of their rights under the CEDAW Convention which prevents them from claiming their rights.<sup>28</sup> If the female migrant had this awareness they would, according to the Committee, be able to “articulate their aspirations and concerns and participate in decisions affecting their lives”.<sup>29</sup> Through this objectification of women they are rendered as having false consciousness and without agency. Framing the problem in these terms also facilitates human rights discourse in its maintenance of the false impression that its own culture is one in which women are not objectified, essentialised, or experiencing asymmetrical forms of power (cf. Otto 2018).

In the view of human rights actors, honour has thus travelled without any visible change and resulted in a ‘strong’ patriarchy to be refigured in a liberal European setting. The West stands once again as a place of remarkable equality, purity and goodness in which patriarchy has been outsourced and replaced with a “democratic brotherhood” (Grewal 2013, 2). Such a discourse on “outsourcing patriarchy” (Grewal 2013, 2) is in need of serious critical attention. As decolonial scholars such as María Lugones (2010) have argued, the gender binary upon which the ‘modern’ feminist concept of patriarchy is based, was fundamental to the project of colonisation. Central to the colonisation of the new world, and of the European peasant classes, was the introduction of clear gender ideals articulated in relation to bourgeois European Man (Federici 2004). In this sense, the outsourcing of patriarchy must already be understood in terms of the initial origins of patriarchy within European bourgeois discourse and its project of colonisation and world (re)making.

The task set for migrants is to adapt, integrate and ideally assimilate in accordance with what is presumably a condition of *culture-lessness* in the diaspora. In this sense, human rights and neo-liberal and secular ideology more broadly involve what Wendy Brown (2012) describes as taking “the power out of culture and getting culture out of power” (7). Power and culture are here conveyed as two separate entities, with no attention paid to how culture is dynamic and always implicated in power, and power is always historical, cultural, and social. According to the self-perception of human rights, it is exactly the idea that cultures are not monolithic, static and unchangeable that makes it possible to ensure cultural change. However, human rights discourses do not see their own discourses and social practices as a matter of power, resulting in a one-sided conception of who does cultural change. As a result, some cultures (and religions) are rendered infelicitous.

So far, this article has demonstrated how honour is made equivalent to HRV, and how the colonial gaze of the human rights discourse has rendered this as an issue

<sup>27</sup> UNGA. Violence against women, report by the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. (20 August 2004) UN Doc A/59/281, para 40; see also CEDAW Committee. Concluding Observations on Finland. (10 March 2014) UN Doc CEDAW/C/FIN/CO/7, para 30.

<sup>28</sup> CEDAW Committee. Concluding Observations on Norway. (22 November 2017) UN Doc CEDAW/C/NOR/CO/9, paras 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> CEDAW and CRC Committees, *supra* n 2, para 66.

with Muslim countries and their populations which are portrayed as responsible for bringing it to what is seen as a purified Europe. As part of the final strategy deployed by the human rights discourse, I draw attention to how sexuality and the control of women's body is avenues which further the colonial-saviour narrative.

## Controlling Women Through Honour

The entire discourse on honour within international human rights and society more generally is concerned with the control of women. The colonial saviour gaze found within international human rights furthers an image of a victimised and (de-)sexualised subject who is governed through honour. In this section, I address some of the anxieties and fetishes found within international human rights discourse considering the central values of dignity and sexuality which constitute its ontological basis (Sabsay 2016a; Whyte 2019). I furthermore disclose how human rights discourse sees the control of women's bodies as the key battle ground and instrument for the eradication of honour. In this regard, it is useful to consider a report from 2002, during an earlier time of intense knowledge production about honour as it demonstrates how the understanding of sexuality and patriarchy perceived as relating to honour are considered prior to a time before dignity and human rights:

Honour is a magic word, which can be used to cloak the most heinous of crimes. The concept of honour is especially powerful because it exists beyond *reason and beyond analysis*. But what masquerades as 'honour' is really *men's need to control women's sexuality and their freedom*. These murders are not based on religious beliefs but, rather, deeply rooted cultural ones. Family status depends on honour. In *patriarchal and patrilineal* societies maintaining the honour of the family is a woman's responsibility. In these societies, the concept of women as commodities and not as human beings endowed with *dignity* and rights equal to those of men is deeply embedded. Women are seen as the *property* of men and they have to be obedient and passive, not assertive and active. Their assertion is considered as an element which would result in an imbalance of power relations within the parameters of the family unit.<sup>30</sup>

What these comments from a former Special Rapporteur on VAW make clear is the neo-colonial logic underpinning human rights discourse's abandonment of any effort to understand or 'know' what it means to live with honour. Furthermore, their statement, raises important questions about the historicity of human rights discourse (on dignity and equality) itself, and its 'emergence' in response to the patriarchal and honour-based social order of European feudalism (Hobbes 1996). At the centre of this cultural critique, however, is the juxtaposition of honour with 'dignity' and the reinforcement of my earlier claim that honour cultures are the constitutive 'outside' of international human rights discourse per se. Honour which forms part of harmful practices as declared by the CEDAW and CRC Committees "constitute[s] a denial of

<sup>30</sup> UNCHR, Radhika Coomaraswamy. *supra* n 21, para 27, emphasis mine.

the dignity and/or integrity of the individual”.<sup>31</sup> Dignity is crucial for international human rights and presupposes a particular subject. The dignity-bearing subject is supposedly autonomous, and can direct their own life and take critical distance from “external” norms (Dworkin 2008, 9–10; Waldron 2009, 238). Such an interpretation and orientation assume that dignity-bearing subjects can make active, informed, and individual choices with regard to ‘traditional’ or cultural norms whereas honour-bearing subjects are portrayed as unaware of their true desires, adhering to socially prescribed norms, and as making decisions under collective influence, a sentiment expressed through the above claim in which women are powerless, non-agentic and oppressed. Human rights discourse offers a false choice between, on the one hand, a life within a culture with honour and thus violence, sexism and traditions through collective social values, and on the other, rights and dignity that can be enjoyed on non-cultural and gender equal terms through an individualised fashion.

The human rights discourse with its “Western eyes” (Mohanty 2003, 515), frames its concern with honour in terms of the dynamics of (sexual) control and a mode of performing masculinity that it deems to be normatively bad. In doing so, it justifies its external intervention and governance so that male and female subjects of honour can be corrected and normalised according to the values and prescriptive statements of human rights. The orientalist reporting and knowledge production found within the UN discourse on honour demonstrates how “discourses of cultural and sexual difference are powerfully mapped onto each other” and that such a representation of female subjects living with “honour” is tied to sexual imageries, desires and fears (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 46). Male subjects are rendered already (potentially) criminal and (certainly) suspicious as it is their roles as husbands, fathers, boyfriends or brothers that is seen to be threatening daughters, girlfriends or sisters with death, based upon a perceived need for men to control women’s sexuality and their freedom.<sup>32</sup>

According to this logic of the human rights discourse, in order to fully realise themselves as subjects of rights, the subjects of honour must leave their family and its space of power and influence. The collective (non-individuated) dimension of honour, the former Special Rapporteur on VAW has argued:

[...] makes it extremely difficult to separate the victim from actual or potential perpetrators, unless she is willing to break off all relations with her family and begin a new life outside her social frame of reference.<sup>33</sup>

A new beginning is only possible when the life of honour is rejected. Only then can a new way of being, which is without the network of social and affective ties and relations, be realised. What this line of argument presupposes, and as Kapur astutely notes, is that “liberalism must be used to challenge tradition and the social formation

<sup>31</sup> CEDAW and CRC Committees, *Supra* n 2, para. 16.

<sup>32</sup> UNHRC. Integration of the human rights of women and the gender perspective, report by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Yakin Ertürk. (18 March 2005), UN Doc E/CN.4/2005/72/Add.1, para 336. See also: CEDAW and CRC Committees, *Supra* n 2, para 30; UNCHR, Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Supra* n 21, para 27, emphasis mine.

<sup>33</sup> UNHRC. Mission to Sweden, report by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Yakin Ertürk. (6 February 2007) UN Doc A/HRC/4/34/Add.3, para 36.

of sexual desire, to ensure that women think first before they give themselves away to another” (Kapur 2005, 16). Girls (Muslim and migrant ones) are encouraged to resist their oppressive families as human rights discourse, its institutions and its ‘protections’, offers them an avenue through which they can be assisted through the gates of ‘modernity’.

In this way, young girls have become the beacon of hope against honour and the solution to problems in the non-Western world and their respective diasporas. In this perverse twist on Fanon’s (1965) description of French colonialism in Algeria: “Let’s win over the women and the rest will follow” (37), migrant communities are seen as “obstacles to sexual progress” (Dhawan 2013, 203), and their female members identified as the crucial means through which to bring about a liberalising transformation of them as they are considered capable of assimilation and change. The focus on migrant women’s vulnerability is a selectively chosen strategy through which human rights seeks to govern honour. This is captured in the following statement by some migrant women in the Netherlands as expressed in a report by then Special Rapporteur Yakin Ertürk:

While immigrant women generally welcomed the Government’s commitment to tackle VAW within their communities, they often felt that the authorities selectively focused on special phenomena such as HRV or FGM [female genital mutilation], without adequately addressing immigrant status and the general vulnerabilities of immigrant women with respect to violence.<sup>34</sup>

In this way, the colonial saviour narrative operates to place all the blame on the dangerous brown man. It is the sexual regulation tied to honour which is considered more significant to combat than the violence and vulnerability experienced by migrant women in their encounter with European states. The colonial gaze fixated upon sex takes honour-as-HRV as merely being a punishment for actual or suspected “transgression of these social norms” relating to sexual conduct and behaviour.<sup>35</sup> More specifically the behaviours in question are understood to:

include entering into sexual relations before marriage, refusing to agree to an arranged marriage, entering into a marriage without parental consent, committing adultery, seeking divorce, dressing in a way that is viewed as unacceptable to the community, working outside the home or generally failing to conform to stereotyped gender roles. Crimes in the name of so-called honour may also be committed against girls and women because they have been victims of sexual violence.<sup>36</sup>

When honour cultures are understood exclusively as being fixated upon sex, it furthers the image of honour cultures as obsessed with ‘purity’ in the body. Such a narrative, however, serves to perpetuate the female body as only a *body for sex*.

<sup>34</sup> UNHRC. Mission to Netherlands, report by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Yakin Ertürk. (7 February 2007) UN Doc A/HRC/4/34/Add.4, para. 54.

<sup>35</sup> UNHRC. Dubravka Šimonovic, *supra* n 11, para 26. See also: UN NEWS, *supra* n 9.

<sup>36</sup> CEDAW and CRC Committees, *supra* n 2, para 29.

The emphasis on sexual behaviour rather than the structural power of honour creates a moral panic and furthers an exotic image of its women as desexualised, perpetuating an oriental imaginary. Repeating the colonial tropes, but this time in reverse, sexuality has come to form part of “a developmental narrative” (Dhawan 2013, 2016) which is racial (Al-Saji 2013; Sabsay 2016b, 10). Whilst the Orient historically was an eroticised symbolic space (cf. Ahmed 1982, 524; McClintock 1995, 22), in more contemporary discourse, and pertaining to honour specifically, it is understood as equally a space of repressed sexuality. There are, however, contradictions in the Western narrative of the Orient, as it is simultaneously constructed as the place of repressive and deviant sexuality but nonetheless as being different from the liberated sexual freedoms of the West. To this end, it is interesting to note how honour is also constructed as an issue with heteronormativity, particularly with regards to LGBT+ community. In the 2015 annual report by the UN High Commissioner, it is expressed that LGBT persons “have also been victims of so-called ‘honour’ killings [...] for transgressing gender norms or for sexual behaviour, including actual or assumed homosexual conduct”.<sup>37</sup> In this way, the problem in relation to honour is that a sexual liberation and development is yet to happen, both in terms of how women must liberate themselves, and in terms of how honour must liberate itself from heteronormativity, as honour is viewed as homophobic as well as repressive of women. Heteronormativity is not simply confined to the world of honour, however, and it is the product itself of the logic of coloniality in the first instance (Lugones 2010). Also, the development of new forms of sexual identities associated with Europe still involves modes of discipline and normalisation despite it being narrated otherwise (Foucault 1978). Yet, the issue is with how freedom and sexuality for the rights-bearing subject only allows for Western mode of being sexually free. In reducing honour to the sexualised body, the human rights epistemology precludes an exploration of how honour is not simply determined upon the actuality of the body alone, but also upon the aesthetic and ascetic figuring of that same body and its dispositions, the performance of everyday activities, and the realm of desires. Honour must, therefore, be understood outside of this framework in which the sexual subject has been elevated to the category of the universal and thereby caught up with a neo-colonial-saviour narrative which is deeply orientalist, gendered and obsessed with sexuality.

## Lingering Thoughts and Future Directions

By way of conclusion, I want to offer some brief remarks on the future of research on practices of honour and the terms upon which they ought to proceed. Through the three interconnecting strategies of epistemic violence, I have argued against the

<sup>37</sup> UNHRC. Discrimination and violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. (4 May 2015) UN Doc A/HRC/29/23, para 30.

governmentality of international human rights which violently forecloses alternative ways of reading, understanding, and constructing honour. By highlighting the coloniality of international human rights discourse, including its self-referential authority and its linear view of history, the limited notion of the human is challenged. This critique discloses a new analytical space for researchers to attend to the voices, grammars and experiences of women who live with honour in their everyday and to take seriously their practices and desires. Within the hegemonic approach to honour shaped by human rights discourse, women are represented (spoken for and about) such that their agency and the complexity of their lives is expressed through generalised, transcendent, and Eurocentric perspectives. At stake, as has been indicated up until this point, is a problem of competing objectivities and thus temporalities of progress, one which is secular, Western, and linked to increasing individuality and development, and the other which is Muslim, behind the times, traditional, collective, and pre-‘modern’.

We urgently need to *provincialise* Europe, human rights and its self-understanding (cf. Chakrabarty 2007). This is necessary so as to create a “more equitable and fair politics of speaking and listening” (Dhawan 2013, 213), as well as a more nuanced form of knowledge production in relation to practices which are considered abject. In doing so, attention should be given both to intersubjective and personal accounts as well as being critical of social structures and historical situations (Al-Saji 2013, 2). Re-approaching ‘honour’ in this way would attend to such practices in their specificity, nuance, and context. It would trace the role of positive or productive power in the constitution of the self as a moral agent with an embedded and worldly mode of subjectivity. Such a lens will provide a more complex image of the everyday reality of such subjects (Foucault 1978, 1997). Finally, and maybe most importantly, it would recognise that ‘honour’ is important insofar as the representation of the concept found within human rights discourse fails to comprehend and express that the experiences of those that live with ‘honour’ and know it to be a site of power, dignity, and ethics.

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