

The *Pukhtunwali* Code of Honour (*Nang*) as a Floating Signifier

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Abstract

This paper examines *Pukhtunwali*'s code of honour (*Nang*) as a floating signifier — a concept whose meaning shifts according to context rather than remaining fixed, following Stuart Hall's theorisation of the term. Drawing on Halvor Moxnes's distinction between ascribed and acquired honour, the study analyses selected Pukhtun folktales to trace how *Nang* is constructed, contested, and gendered. Through tales such as "Ramdad Khan," "Ajab Khan," and "The Bazaar of Storytellers," the paper shows how honour attaches to *Zameen* (land) and to *Zar* (skill), each generating a distinct, situational definition of what it means to be a true Pukhtun (*Nangyalay*). The analysis then turns to the gendering of honour, arguing that *Nang* (male honour) and *Namus* (female honour) operate under entirely different — and unequal — logics: male honour is won through assertiveness, land, and revenge, while female honour is preserved through purdah, silence, and sexual restraint. Readings of tales including "The Sin of Pride," "The Gardener's Daughter," and "The Parrot and the Starling" illustrate how patriarchal norms are naturalised and enforced within the folk tradition itself. The paper concludes that *Pukhtunwali*'s code of honour cannot be treated as a stable, monolithic tradition, but must be understood as a fluid discourse continually reshaped by gender, context, and narrative.

Key Words: *Pukhtunwali*; *Nang*; *Namus*; Folktales; Pukhtu

Introduction

Pukhtunwali or "doing *Pukhtu*" is an unwritten code of conduct or idealised behaviour that regulates the behaviour of Pushtuns, inspires ethnic cohesion, and fosters strong cultural ties and, at times, acts as the supreme law of the land. Since it is an idealised behaviour and unwritten package of historical experiences, time and again different people have made different attempts that have led to overly simplistic understanding of this dynamic and vibrant code. For this purpose, this study is an attempt in the existing body of wide and varied literature on *Pukhtunwali* and aims to know how it exists in the Pukhtun folktales and how it has changed since.

Since the only motive behind this construction was to meet a particular agenda, the socio-cultural and indigenous imperatives were ignored. New meanings were imparted to the tenets of

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Pukhtunwali. The tenets of *Nang* (honour), *Badal* (revenge), *Paighor* (taunt) and *Nanawati* (seeking of pardon) have been repeated over the centuries. This parroting of concepts without an understanding of their fullest sense has done tremendous harm to the identity construction of Pukhtuns. This essentialist approach set into motion a myopic tradition of interpretations that not only enabled the outsiders to strengthen their footholds but facilitated their global designs. Winston Churchill is one such example in the long-nurtured tradition of imparting meanings to *Pukhtunwali*. He writes about *Pukhtunwali* that “Their system of ethics which regards treachery and violence as virtues rather than vices, has produced a code of honour so strange and inconsistent that it is incomprehensible to the logical mind” (as cited in Ahmed, 2013, p. 179).

This study studies *Pukhtunwali* in the Pukhtun folktales and brings out the dynamic nature of this vibrant code.

The Floating Signifier: Theoretical Framework

Much has been said about the western construction of Pukhtunness in anthropological and 'security literature' but little has been written and discussed in the folktales about the ways in which Pukhtuns themselves construct their notions of *Pukhtunwali*.

Stuart Hall examines the inner working of the system of race and explores why race matters. Hall terms race as a floating signifier because it never has the same definition. The meaning changes with history, context, stories, and events. In his seminal lecture, *Race as Floating Signifier* (Hall, 1996), he writes:

Race works like a language. And signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture, to its practices for making meaning and those things gain their meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. To the losing of old meanings, and the appropriation and collection and contracting of new ones, to the endless process of being constantly re-signified made to mean something different in different cultures, different historical formations at different moments of time. (Hall, 1996, p. 8)

The changing nature of meaning becomes crucial for this study of *Pukhtunwali* because its meaning too is not fixed but has been subjected to the constant process of appropriation in different contexts.

Hall argues that race is not fixed in its inner nature but rather a floating signifier, a sign, a badge and a token. The meaning of a signifier is not fixed, always sliding and ever changing (Hall, 1996, p. 9). This shifting of the meaning is important in the context of *Pukhtunwali* because for some observers it means code of honour, for some it is a code of revenge, and for others it becomes a badge, a sign and a token of ethnic identity.

This paper describes and analyses the Pukhtun code of honour and its various dimensions through folktales. The gist of *Pukhtunwali* is that Pukhtuns are different from other people not only due to their language but also due to their behaviour. A person who can speak Pukhtu, but has no *Pukhtunwali* and does not follow it in letter and spirit is not a Pukhtun. Only that person is called a Pukhtun who speaks and does Pukhtu. So doing Pukhtu means bringing one's behaviour in line with the ideals of *Pukhtunwali*. “A Pukhtun is he who neither disgraces himself nor others” (Hussain, n.d., p. 12). It can be noted here that rules of behaviour follow the dichotomy of shame and honour. A behaviour is considered honourable when it is honourable in the eyes of the public but when public scrutiny rejects it, it becomes shameful and invites disgrace. It is, therefore, necessary to note that *Pukhtunwali* as a code of honour follows the dichotomy of shame and honour. Behaviour then is guided and regulated by popular perceptions. In such a situation, context

becomes extremely important. Because public opinion is the judge and the jury, and it varies from person to person, the essence of the behaviour becomes fluid and takes shape according to circumstances.

Nang (honour) is the essence of behaviour among Pukhtuns that regulates and controls their lives. "The world is all but shame, good name and honour; if there is no honour the world is but naught" (Kamil, n.d., p. 315). *Nang*, in fact, means honour, a word of Persian origin taken up by Pukhtu and Urdu, carrying the same meaning. *Nang* is a noun while *Nangayal*, an adjective, stands for the person who respects his honour and in order to protect and elevate his self-respect he develops certain traits and high qualities which modify him to be unique and superior person of his society and community.

Nang is attached to three other cultural values: *Sharam* (shame), *Paighor* (taunt) and *Badal* (revenge). Apart from these three cultural values, the battle for the defence and protection of one's *Nang* is played out through *Zar* (gold), *Zan* (Woman) and *Zameen* (Land). The issue of *Zan* comes under the category of *Namus* which means protection of the womenfolk, children and other related family and tribal members. Any laxity or failure exhibited in defending or standing to the looming threats to *Namus* results in shame and other social retributions. *Zar* refers to the resources and other natural bounties that a Pukhtun must exploit and hone his skills accordingly. *Zameen* is the cornerstone of Pukhtun social life. Almost all his life cycle revolves around his love for land. Land is crucial for the overt and covert feelings of patriotism. Any threat to territory is a direct threat to a Pukhtun's *nang*. "A Pukhtun without his own land is like an orphan" (Khan, 1994, p. 33).

For this purpose, the definition of honour given by Halvor Moxnes shall be used to analyse the Pukhtun code of honour. He, defines honour as "fundamentally the public recognition of one's social setting" (Moxnes, n.d., p. 2). His division of honour into ascribed and acquired honour becomes important for this analysis of Pukhtun *nang* in the Pukhtun folktales. According to Moxnes, "ascribed honour" is received or inherited from family at birth and is strongly associated with family membership. The social, political and economic conditions of a family play a seminal role in the shaping and making of the honour. Talent or individual skill has no part in it. By comparison, the honour accorded on the basis of righteous and honourable acts is termed as "acquired honour." The acquired honour is very fluid and may either lose or gain significance in the hellish vortex and unending scramble for public recognition. These two categories of *nang* are socially changeable, acquire new meanings and new definitions.

Nang and Zameen

One significant source of hostility among Pukhtun men is land. The attachment and affiliation associated with territory and land becomes a matter of identity. Those people who have cultivated property and more land are regarded as true Pukhtuns and those who possess or have little piece of land are considered as non-Pukhtuns or less-Pukhtuns. This Pukhtunness associated with land becomes a matter of pride, grace and social status. The tale of "Ramdad Khan" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 165) demonstrates the rivalry between Ramdad Khan and his paternal cousins over a piece of land. As the owner of a vast tract of land, Ramdad Khan is famous for his generosity and hospitality. Jealous of Ramdad Khan's honourable status among his peers, his cousins hatch a plot to kill him and deprive him of his land and status. His cousins succeed in dislodging Ramdad Khan from his "acquired honour" and take control of his land and women. In Moxnes's words, Ramdad's cousins' struggle to dislodge him of his power and prestige is "characterised by a warrior-like quest for honour." This "quest for honour" is of fundamental significance to all Pukhtuns especially when it involves their immediate cousins. A popular Pukhtu proverb captures the image of Pukhtun cousins as "Cousinhood is a dangerous neighborhood" (Khattak, 2007, p. 72).

In the folktale “Ajab Khan,” achieving independence becomes a matter of pride and a source of boasting. Here the theme of acquired honour is played out. Ajab Khan Afridi, the central hero of the tale, is a layman who does not possess any honour; his passion and love for his land catapults him to a nationalist hero. As a tight-lipped and shy youth, Ajab would always stay indoors and would not participate in any activity. As an anonymous figure in the tribal vortex, Ajab rises to a new height when he expresses and shares his strong dislike of English rule. Ajab Khan speaks his heart out to his friends in the following words: “My friends, all the Britishers are thorns in my eyes. I resent it when we are humiliated and when the Englishmen consider us as slaves” (Nasir & Heston, 2009, p. 268). Ajab Khan tries his honest best to inspire and unite his people against the British forces. His sense of ‘*Nangyalay*’ (honourable man) is linked with the freedom of his land. He expresses his desire as following: “Only when we sacrifice our lives for our country will we be genuine Pathans” (Nasir & Heston, 2009, p. 268).

Ajab Khan’s fight against the English rule transforms him from a simple wayward boy to a national icon, a true *nangyalay*. His unparalleled patriotism makes him a quintessential symbol of “acquired honour.” Ajab Khan’s struggle is an embodiment of Ghani Khan’s definition of a genuine Pathan as a “Pukhtun mountain of courage, intrepid and unyielding” (Khan, 1994, p. 34).

Zar and Nang

Zar in Pukhtu refers to gold; however, it also stands for improving one’s life and acquiring all the necessary crafts that one can use for the progress and prosperity of society. Khushal Khan Khattak defines his skilful *Nangyal* as “a person would always prefer to improve and master social skills, acquire wealth and money by the sheer dint of his hard work” (Khan, 1994, p. 93). Here another definition of *nang* emerges which is not based on conquest and revenge but based on the qualities that are essential for personal development.

The tale of “The Adventures of Ulphoo and Shurpoo” (no.XXXVII) highlights the importance of acquiring skill through getting education. Ulphoo, the wise son, dedicates his life to school while his foolish brother Shurpoo instead chooses to become a farmer. Armed with relevant skills, Ulphoo succeeds in relieving his family of all the issues while his foolish brother, Shurpoo fails to mark his worth in his profession thereby losing his social worth. So here *Nang* based on skill becomes an “embodiment of construction” not only for his own good but for his family, society and country.

Zan and Gendering Honour

Zan in popular Pukhtu parlance refers to woman and *Namus* is defined as “Men’s duty to protect and respect women” (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 97). *Nang* and *Namus* (pride) can be used to explain gender relations in Pashtun folktales.

One of the traits of the ideal Pukhtun woman is that “she keeps within the house, she observes purdah and she never taints the family honour through adultery” (Boesen, n.d., p. 111). The honour of the household, clan and the community is rigidly tied to the place and position of the female members in the family. The Pukhtun says that “the honour of the family is embodied in the honour of its women; the maintenance of family honour requires control over and protection of the women on par with that of the house, property and land, all of which are subsumed under the same concept of honour- *Namus*” (Boesen, n.d., p. 107).

Zan, woman, therefore is regarded as “bone of contention and the instigator of all conflicts” (Boesen, n.d., p. 71) among Pukhtuns. This misplaced and myopic notion of *zan* is primarily grounded in the asymmetrical Pukhtun gender structure which is supported and preserved by the strict patriarchal norms prevalent in Pukhtun society.

This section is primarily concerned with the patriarchal norms in the selected Pukhtun folktales. Pukhtun code of *Nang* (honour) highlights and maintains masculine features of Pukhtun life. It is, therefore, essential to study and analyse Honour from a gendered perspective. Because “concept of honor is critical for changing gender relations” and can prove a useful tool in “liberating men and women from the constraints of traditional gender roles and expectations” (Moghaddam, n.d., p. 2).

The following section is aimed at the analysis of patriarchal norms and the gendering of honour in the Pukhtun folktales.

Prominent Features of Pukhtun Patriarchy in the Tales

"Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole" (Millett, 1970, p. 33).

Before any discussion on the features of patriarchy in the folktales, it is important to give a brief overview of the basic working of the Pukhtun patriarchy because male honour (*Nang*) is associated with the protection and control of women honour (*Namus*). The Pukhtun household forms the fundamental social, political and economic skeleton of Pukhtun life. "Households and descent-groups are based on patrilineal descent where each household through its senior male member is placed within a ramified descent system ideally comprising all Pukhtun" (Boesen, n.d., p. 110). The Pukhtun family is the quintessence of patriarchal model. The family is always 'patriarchal' with the elder male as the head of the family, representing the family in the community, and having the sole authority of decision making related to the allotment of resources and their division in the family.

Among Pukhtuns distant cousins (*tarboors*) can also come under the ambit of an extended family and play central role in perpetuating the patriarchal norms and are considered as the immediate defenders of the family honour and *namus* (women honour).

"The chief contribution of the family in patriarchy is the socialization of the young (largely through the example and admonition of their parents into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes" (Millett, 1970, p. 34). The tribal nature of a Pukhtun household demands that the 'socialization of the young' especially the boys be strictly carried out according to the tribal needs. As conflict and fierce competition (*siyali*) mark the Pukhtun ethos, therefore preference for male children is always celebrated with great pomp and show. The birth of a boy is preferred because "It is more rewarding to give birth to a boy than to a girl" (Khan, 1994, p. 185).

The strong patriarchal preference for the male heirs is reverberated in the tale '*The Sin of Pride*' where the head of the family, Gulzamani enjoys the ownership of his vast land, wealth and commands the company of five beautiful wives but unfortunately he feels himself disempowered and vulnerable because he has no male children. "There was a great disappointment to him, and he was troubled that he had no male heir to inherit his wealth" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 80). Dejected and frightened by the thought of losing social standing, one day Gulzamani hears the voice of a fakir begging who asks him for some food and Gulzamani invites him to his 'hujra' (guest house), entertains him with delicious food and presents him some gifts. To which the hopeless Gulzamani gives the following reply "I have five wives but none of them has borne me a male child, and when I die there will be no one to whom I can leave my wealth" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 80). Gulzamani's foreboding points to another interesting aspect of Pukhtun social life. As sons are the ultimate heirs and keepers of the father's property, the lack of legitimate male heir to the family fortunes is taken by the immediate male cousin (*Tarboor*). Thus the land and the wealth go into the possession of the male cousins. Gulzamani also feels threatened by this imminent danger.

After some months, each wife gives birth to a beautiful son except Zubaydah because she has eaten half of the berry, therefore she unfortunately gives birth to a stillborn child. Here the patriarchal dictum descends upon the fate of poor Zubaydah. As her son fails to meet the requirements of the society, therefore his misfortunes and miseries land her mother into horrendous living conditions. Gulzamani starts losing interest in her. "In his pride and self-satisfaction, Gulzamani ceased to take any interest in her and gradually the other wives started hating her" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 82). Gulzamani's love for more sons is in line with the demand of Pukhtun society.

Lastly, the remarks of Charles Lindholm very aptly sums up the miserable fate of Zubaydah when he writes that "While the Pukhtun husbands prefer male children for the purpose of ensuring male heirs for the family land, the wife prefers male children for the hope that this secures against divorce on the one hand, and potential allies against the husband on the other" (Khan, 1994, p. 188). The stillborn birth of the boy leaves Zubaydah devastated; she is deserted not only by her husband but she also loses her potential allies, the other four rival wives. Had Zubaydah borne a healthy male child, she could have easily fought her rivals, the other wives, but she unfortunately fails to win over them.

Similarly, in the tale of '*The Gardener's Daughter*' (no.13) another perverse feature, Walwar (bride price) of Pukhtun patriarchy is depicted. Marriages among Pukhtuns are arranged for their sons and daughters by their parents. The tale under discussion also touches on the issue of choice in the marriage.

In the tale, the king with a vast empire has a son who despite the forty wives is still in need of another woman. One day during his hunting excursions, the prince's eyes meet a girl whose angelic beauty impresses him so much that he orders his vizier to send her a marriage proposal. The gardener first refuses to accept the proposal but caves in to the pressure of the mighty king, accepts his proposal on a condition that he will first ask his family members, if anyone of them wishes to marry his daughter then the proposal will stay cancelled and if none of them is willing to marry her then she is yours, you can take her. This reference to the family members' consent points to the dominant trend of marriages inside the family and the clan among Pukhtuns. Marriages outside the family and the community have been non-existent trend but this trend is diminishing due to the flourishing of modern education and widespread migrations.

After due consultations with the cousins and other family members, none of them objects to her marriage outside the clan, the gardener turns to the king and gives her daughter in marriage to the lascivious prince. The king is extremely happy and asks him about the possible reward. To which the gardener makes the following reply, "Three thousand rupees as a bride price" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 41). Without any qualms, the king agrees to the 'price of the bride', fixes the date and returns happily to his palace. (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 76).

As discussed earlier, marriages among Pukhtuns are arranged by the male members of the house without taking the consent of the girl and other female members. The exchange of women against a bride price (walwar) has been an established phenomenon. There is another form of marriage among Pukhtuns which is called as "Badala, a term which conveys the concept of equality and balance" (Boesen, n.d., p. 110). This kind of marriages occurs rarely but the concept of Walwar is all too dominant. Walwar (bride-price) varies from place to place.

This practice of fixing bride price highlights the patriarchal attitude towards women which treat them as a commodity. This outright attitude is entirely in discord with Islamic treatment of women. Here the perennial contradiction in the norms of Pukhtu (*Pukhtunwali*) and Islam regarding the treatment of women is emphasised. Boesen rightly highlights that "Islam operates in principle with another type of bridal-payment, the mahr, which is a gift from the groom's family to the bride herself" (Boesen, n.d., p. 111). The walwar, as we have seen in the tale of *The Gardener's Daughter*

goes into the hands of her father which is aptly considered as “immoral according to Islam on account of its character as a buying-and-selling transaction” (Boesen, n.d., p. 111).

This perverted practice of suppressing the wishes and aspirations of womenfolk in the name of *Nang* (honour) has been proudly celebrated since time immemorial as ‘doing Pukhtu’. However, these misplaced and inhumane practices are diminishing and the shackles of patriarchy are falling apart but still it is a long and tedious battle that needs to be battled with the arm of modern education.

Another prominent feature of the Pukhtun patriarchy that the tale under discussion brings out is misogyny. In his thesis, “*Pukhtun Men’s Perceptions of the Conditions Promoting Domestic Violence in their Culture*” (2012), Muhammad Saeed argues that manliness and honour (ghairat) among Pukhtun is taken for the strong control of womenfolk and their sexuality. He further writes that “Women’s disobedience is not bearable for Pukhtuns because their ghairat (honor) is largely tied to their tight control of women” (Saeed, 2012, p. 107). This popular perception is indicative of the misogynistic attitudes embedded in the Pukhtun patriarchy.

Gendering Honour: Shame and Honour in the Folktales

"Doing Pukhtu constitutes different behavior for men and women" (Benedict, n.d., p. 84). ‘Doing Pukhtu’ is the essence of Pukhtun *Nang* (man honour) and *Namus* (woman honour) and only that person does ‘Pukhtu’ who “embraces honor, does good to others, and is brave, vengeful and loyal to his land and traditions” (Saeed, 2012, p. 95). As we shall discuss in the proceeding section that man’s ghairat (honour) is associated with virility, masculinity, his namus- strict control over his women’s bearing and sexuality, taking revenge and his ability of providing for the livelihood of his family. While on the other hand in a striking contrast to male’s concept of *Nang* (honour), a woman’s ghairat (honour) includes her “tolerance, her obedience and servitude towards her husband and her parents (in laws), her observing of purdah, taking care of her children and husband’s property and honor” (Ibid).

This contrast points to the fact that the concept of *Nang* is highly gendered and needs to be analysed from a gender perspective. Before any discussion on the concept of honour, it becomes important to define gender because there is popular misconception about gender that it is only and all about ‘women issues and their concerns’ Kate Millett identifies sex as “a biological category” and gender as “psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations” (Millett, 1970, p. 30). She also mentions that the proper terms for gender are ‘masculine and feminine’ (Ibid). Therefore, my analysis of gendering honour includes both masculine and feminine aspects.

Masculinity and the concept of Honour

The term for masculine in Pukhtu is ‘nar’ and masculinity is ‘nartoob’. Any Pukhtun devoid of ‘nartoob’ (masculinity) is considered as ‘Beghairat (coward or dishonoured). The other strong word for a coward is ‘dala daus’ (effeminate) which brackets one in the category of women. Equating men with women then becomes a cause of insult, humiliation and taunt (paighor). Muhammad Saeed writes about taunt: “In Pukhtun culture ‘real manhood’ entails the demonstration of aggressive, formal and rigid attitudes towards women (wives). Men who deny or violate this pattern are ridiculed not only by their family members but also by the community and peers” (Saeed, 2012, p. 109).

The tale of ‘*The Prince and The Vizier’s Son*’ demonstrates the way men consider it their primary duty to tame and restrict their womenfolk. In the tale, the Vizier’s son makes a vow to take that woman her wife who allows him to strike her five times a day with a shoe. He justifies his ridiculous act by saying that “This I said in order that no one might consent to have anything to do with me” (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 181). Thus it points to another important dimension of Pukhtun

masculinity as Muhammad Saeed writes “Masculinity and manhood in Pukhtun society is therefore performed for certain audiences including the family and public” (Saeed, 2012, p. 109). The Vizier’s son absurd condition of beating his wife is performed to prove his power, control and strength to his peers and family members because a person who lacks control over his women is regarded as ‘dala daus’² Thus that person is ‘izatdaar’ (honourable) who shows aggression to his wife and can make her obedient. This popular sentiment was reflected in my conversation with a Pukhtun man, Khan Ameer, living in UAE. He said that (K. Amir, personal communication, July 19, 2016):

“When my wife disobeys my parents and related family members, I have to beat her in order to avoid their taunts and show my manliness. I am only ghairatmand ‘manly’ when I have firm control over my wife. I have to keep my head high in public but in private I tender her, wife, my heartfelt apologies.” Here we can see how masculinity is performed to a certain audience, the wife, the family and the community.

Masculinity and the concept of Badal (revenge)

In Pukhtu revenge is termed as badal and it comes up with a heavy burden of meeting the expectation that “Pukhtun do not pardon but retaliate” (Saeed, 2012, p. 111). A Pukhtun is expected to go to any length to take revenge but it is unbecoming of his masculine honour to bear insult and humiliation. Here in this section it will be discussed in the context of masculinity and honour.

The tale of ‘*Musa Khan Deo*’ (no.14) glaringly illustrates this fact. The tale starts with the dejected and sorrow-stricken king who despite the seven brave and wise daughters feels himself threatened, insecure and incomplete. His sense of completeness lays in having male heirs because it is ‘real man’ who can exact revenge and avert any untoward situation. “To be a ‘real man’ is to be vengeful in Pukhtun society” (Saeed, 2012, p. 112). The king perceived fears confirm this bitter fact of Pukhtun masculinity.

One day a wandering Fakir, beggar, pacifies and tells the king that if he wants to get a son, he will have to smell the scent of a flower in the garden of a Jinn called Musa Khan. Confused and demoralised, the king fails to carry out the said task. When one of his daughters comes forward to meet this challenge, the king shrugs off his shoulders and refuses to invest confidence in her bold demeanors.

The king lacks of trust in his daughter’s ‘bold endeavour’ highlights the level of Pukhtun masculinity. Sons are considered as the absolute defenders of family values. “Sons are considered as guns and a person or family with more male power has more strength and influence in the community” (Saeed, 2012, p. 112).

Similarly, in the tale of ‘*The Barber and The Farmer’s Wife*’ (no.35), the barber cuts off the moustache of the farmer. As moustache is the symbol of ‘nartoob’ and ‘saritoob’ (manliness and sophistication) among Pukhtuns, the farmer’s wife is so enraged that she disguises herself in her husband’s clothes and turban and successfully exacts revenge on the barber. This confirms that masculinity and the concept of revenge are associated with aggression, dominance, power and social prestige.

Femininity and the concept of Namus (honour).

“A woman is best either in the house or in the grave” (Khaza ya po kor xa-da yap o gor-ke).

The above Pukhtu proverb exemplifies the place of ‘zan’ (woman) in the Pukhtun society. It points to the depressing litanies of male- oriented code of conduct for women. The proverb also illustrates the position of women and conveys the image of her being a prisoner, “a controlled being who

² Used as a taunt.

should stay at home, work and bear children for the continuation of her husband's lineage" (Boesen, n.d., p. 104).

For a Pukhun *Zan* (woman) 'either the house or the grave'- controlled existence makes for a different code of Honour (*namus*) from the male code of *Nang*. As *Nang*, male code of honour is based on chivalry, assertion, alacrity, boldness, manliness (*saritoob*), *ghairat* (honour) and gun (*toopak*). While *Namus* regarded as the 'feminine version of *Nang*' has different and strict norms that a Pukhun woman has to follow. The feminine code of *Namus* includes: Shame (*tor* and adultery), modesty, *Purdah*, endurance of hardship, sexual purity and chastity.

Shame and *Namus* (honour) in the folktales

Namus (honour) in Pukhtun society for women encompasses virtue and sexual purity. As discussed earlier, *Nang* (masculine honour) becomes a matter of aggression, striving to establish one's name and reputation in the community while *Namus* (Female honour) is marked by 'avoiding action that might stain the reputation of the family'. So, masculine honour is considered as something that needs to be won, celebrated and increased while *Namus* is "something to be conserved and protected from the evil tongues of the envious" (Pitt-Rivers, 1968, p. 11).

'Conservation and protection' of *Namus* is regarded as the highest virtue in Pukhtun women. Come what may a Pukhtun woman has to keep intact her *Namus*. As Akbar S.Ahmed states:

"The chastity and good name of a woman are the most sensitive points of *Nang* in Pukhtun society. A woman's acts reflect her husband's status and honour" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 92). The tale of "Ramdad Khan" highlights the chastity and good name of Pukhtun women. When Ramdad is killed in the duel and his wives taken as prisoners, his rivals make announcement to the womenfolk of Ramdad to choose a man from his gang. Taken aback by their thundering pronouncement, Ramdad's wife musters up courage to protect her *Namus* and *Nang* of her husband. She 'conserves and protect' her *Namus* in the following bold words:

"It won't be that way and never will I allow another's hand on my hair. I am not eager to have husbands and for a Pathan, there is but one husband, he has died, so kill me too on top of him" (Welson, n.d., p. 184). This sorrowful oath of eternal fidelity points to the greatest virtue attached with good name and reputation in Pukhtun women. Ramdad's wife sacrificed her life in order to preserve her husband's name. Similarly, bold, stubborn, questioning the actions of her husbands and willful women are termed as "sluts (*randay*), unfaithful and cheap" (Welson, n.d., p. 185). So, avoiding action, remaining docile and conformity to husband's whims increase respect, dignity and self-esteem of the womenfolk.

This means that 'when women do well, men look good'. '*Namus*' of womenfolk is tied to the *Nang*. However, this so called attachment has a fragile foundation because she has to give up her own aspirations. As the following lines illustrate: "Woman is not an honor, she is human"³

The notion of *Sharam* (shame) is another crucial feature of Pukhtun code of Honour which carries different standards for both male and female. For male '*bes Haram*' (shameless) means less vengeful, unassertive, bearing insults and easygoing on women (effeminate) while '*bes harma*'⁴ is used for the female who does not observe *purdah* and is bold and assertive. Antonio de Guevara argues that if a female could have one virtue, that virtue should be shame, the defence and safeguard of her sexual purity⁵

³ A woman is human, not honor by Mnerwa Tahir. June 18, 2016.

⁴ *Besharma* is used for women who do not abide by social norms. It is also used in the context of an adulterous woman.

⁵ Taylor, S. K. Honor and Violence in Golden Age Spain. 2008. P. 187.

Sexual purity demands that women should be kept under the watchful guard of men. Enclosure (purdah) (both metaphorical and literal⁶) plays central role in preserving the chastity and purity of Pukhtun women. Literal enclosure restricts Pukhtun women's freedom and confines them to the four walls of their house⁷ while metaphorical enclosure makes their lives passive and unassertive, obedient to their men.

In the tale of 'The Parrot and the Starling' (no.18) theme of literal enclosure (purdah) is strongly reiterated. In the tale the starling comes from a menial tribe while the parrot belongs to a royal tribe. One day the fearful storm with rain and wind blows into the parrot's nest. As his nest is flooded with water, the poor parrot comes out of his nest and unknowingly takes refuge in the house of the starling. Seeing him, parrot, inside her house, the mother of the starling gets angry and starts shouting at him. Her enraged mother says: "You have broken my daughter's purdah. No male is permitted to set eyes on her, except the one who is to marry her" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 127). In order to preserve the sanctity of the house and chastity of the starling, parrot marries her on a condition that she will not stay out of the house. In return, the parrot shall provide for the food and drink of her daughter. The mother agrees and marries her off to the parrot. The starling dishonours her husband by going out of her house in search of worms thereby transgressing her purdah and breaking her marriage vow.

This imposition of strict enclosure (purdah) ensures the protection of the sexual purity of the starling which in return enhances the reputation and esteem of the parrot. Failing to do so results in dishonouring not only the family but the honour of the whole tribe and clan is disfigured. As Scott K. Taylor argues:

"Neglecting one's chastity or even occasioning a rumor to that effect could only bring shame on the girl's family and her entire lineage" (Taylor, 2008, p. 183).

The fate of the starling confirms the popular notion that "women are the friends of enclosure" (Taylor, 2008, p. 161) and their *Namus* 'rests on chastity and outward show of chastity' (ibid). Outward show of chastity refers to staying inside her designated place.

Similarly, metaphorical enclosure renders her existence to be a model of passivity, obedience and modesty. Freedom, choice of profession and any attempt on her part to prove her independence leaves her with a label of a 'wayward woman'. As Julian Pitt-Rivers argues in his classic essay:

"A woman who takes to physical violence or attempts to usurp the male prerogative of authority....forfeits her shame"⁸

The tale of '*Fuzzle Noor and the Demon*' (no. LXXIII) depicts the vilification of a bold and an asserting woman. So, metaphorical enclosure too is designed to deprive women of their own existence and is aimed at best to preserve her purity and chastity.

So from this detailed discussion on the female code of *Namus* (honour), it becomes crystal clear that honour as compared to men (*Nang*) is a 'burdensome social code that victimises women' and sexual purity is the most important and defining virtue for Pukhtun women. For Pukhtun women there is no way out because if they try to stray from sexual purity and their 'literal and metaphorical enclosures' they are shamed and are bound to be killed.

Code of Honour as a Floating Signifier

After this critical and detailed studying of Honour, it becomes absolutely important that we put behind the idea that Pukhtun code of Honour is an inflexible code that is unchanging and absolute. Pukhtun code of Honour (*nang*) is a quintessential floating signifier that changes its meaning according to context and means something different, as Hall argues, at a different moment of time.

⁶ See Honor and Violence in Golden Age Spain. P. 185.

⁷ See Chadar and Chardevari.

⁸ Pitt-Rivers, J. "Honor and Social Status." Pages 503–511. 1968.

As we saw in our analysis of gendering honour that two different and conflicting interpretations emerged. Honour for men is *Nang* which is associated with courage, bravery, assertiveness, control of women, alacrity, gun and sword, turban and public forums while honour for women is *Namus* which is characterised by shame, modesty, purdah, sexual purity, virginity, tears, and passivity and relegated to private forum. Similarly, new definitions of Pukhtun *Nang* came to light which were associated with one social status, position, revenge, defence of land and social skills.

Pukhtun *Nang*, as we observed inspired passions and emotions but we failed to establish what exactly it stands for, for it changes its significance with context and situation, making it a perfect signifier. One of my interviewee, Samar Khan confirms this confusion (S. Khan, personal communication, March 16, 2016). To her Pukhtu code of Honour means:

Honor is the most fundamental part of *Pukhtunwali*. It means to let others live with their own values and dignity and respect their way of life and let myself to hunt my goals independently and without any threat or imposition of anyone. And *Namus* for me is to pursue my goals diligently

Another respondent, Afrasiab Khattak had an altogether different take on honour. He defined honour as (A. Khattak, personal communication, April 1, 2016):

“Honor is all about self-control and it is self-control that differentiates us from animals. Self-control helps us to keep our reputation intact.”

To cap it all, it becomes clear that *Pukhtunwali* as a code of Honour carries different meanings to different people.

Conclusion

In this study, I attempted to show *Pukhtunwali* as a code of *Nang* (honour). This paper argued that Pakhtunwali as a code of Honour is not carved in stone but rather it has various dimensions depending on the context and situation. *Pukhtunwali* as a code of male Honour has different meanings and different connotations while the female version of *Nang* is *Namus* containing different meanings and a package of altogether different social implications.

This disparity and variation in the *Pukhtunwali* as a code of Honour have various problems. For example, the Pakhtun family system, in this regard, is the site which not only promotes and encourages the culture of gender disparity and Pukhtun women's marginalisation but also encourages the perpetration of the ideology of Pukhtun male superiority. This disparity can be addressed by modifying the Pukhtun family structure through the promotion of quality education and also *Pukhtunwali* modification to comply with international norms need to be focused on. It also needs to be mentioned here violence related to honour is so easily provoked because of the fact that the positive images are associated with male honour while *Namus* is caricatured in the negative light.

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