

Assimilation: A Big Challenge among Immigrants in Honor Based Societies as mirrored by Unni Wikan

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The objective of this paper is to bring out the impact of lack of assimilation of immigrants in the European culture as brought out by Unni Wikan in her book, *In Honor of Fadime: Murder and Shame*. Wikan has brought to fore a number of honor-related issues that the immigrants from traditional Kurdish background face when they settle in the modern western countries. They are not able to shed their strong attachment with the culture of their original homeland making their proper assimilation with the Western culture a big challenge. The Western countries practice multiculturalism that lays greater stress on least interference with the culture and traditions of immigrant communities. Wikan has linked the honor killings of Fadime and many other young women in the Scandinavian countries to the failure of multiculturalism and the assimilation policy of these countries. It has failed to recognize unequal power structures and the existence of patriarchy within immigrant communities. The concept of liberal multiculturalism highlights the importance of respect for culture and traditions of immigrants and at the same time lays greater stress on the human rights and country's legislations.

Keywords: Assimilation, immigrants, multiculturalism, patriarchy, honor, human rights.

Culture refers to various aspects like values, beliefs, language, and practices that people share. It stipulates rules and norms which are followed by individuals as members of a particular group, community or society. Explaining the concept of culture, Unni Wikan explains that it is “your way of seeing, not what you see” (UW 87). These values, attitudes, and ideas are what people have been following since many eras and which have become a part of their life. The day-to-day life is moulded to follow the monotonous rituals with ease. Wikan affirms

that “There are no objective criteria for what ‘culture’ is. Culture is what you choose to see at a given time” (UW 182).

International migrations and assimilation of migrants in the new culture is a topic of great concern ever since the concept of globalization has come up. Movement of people from one part of the world in search of jobs, better living conditions, and to save themselves from social or political persecution in their country is a common occurrence. The term ‘diaspora’ has been coined out of these mass migrations. The diasporic population mainly from South-West Asia and Middle-East countries bring with them the culture of honor of their homeland. Wikan highlights that “Many traditions are strengthened in the diaspora” (UW 69). In a foreign land, these immigrants attempt to reinforce the culture of their original homeland with greater zeal and strength although it may be against the basic tenets of equality of both the genders and may be a threat to humanity. Lodhi and Siddiqui explain that “In few of the societies, traditional practices are still functional, but since there are no defined cultural and traditional standards, they serve as a threat to the progress of humanity” (Lodhi & Siddiqui 58). Migration impacts many aspects of life and its social, economic, and political considerations are important. Mishra and Mahapatra justify that the impacts are both on the immigrants as well as the countries accepting them. “Migration and relocation challenge many of the givens of life, such as culture and identity” (Mishra, Mahapatra 45).

The importance of culture and traditions in the life of immigrants from South Asia and the Middle-East countries who come to the western countries has been elaborated by Wikan with reference to the murder of Fadime Sahindal. She was a second-generation immigrant who belonged to a Kurdish family from Turkey that had settled in Sweden. Unni Wikan mentions:

“Fadime’s family had lived in Sweden for twenty years. They were Kurds from Elbistan near Malatya, a provincial capital in southeast Turkey. Some three-hundred members of their clan are in Sweden, but many have settled in other European countries or are still in Turkey. Fadime’s maternal uncle was the first of the Sahindals to migrate to Sweden, and he arrived at the end of the 1960s. Fadime’s father followed him in 1981. The rest of the family joined him in 1984; Fadime was seven years old at that time” (UW 21).

The influx of these immigrants starts with one member of the family and goes on with others joining over time as elaborated by Andersson

et al. “Turkey has a varied history of migration to Sweden. During the 1960s, Turks arrived as labor migrants, but later there was a shift in character towards refugee immigration, largely dominated by ethnic Kurds” (Andersson, et al. 34).

Wikan delves on the strict rules that men from traditional Middle-East cultures lay down for their daughters and other females in the family when they move to the western countries. Even in Fadime’s case, her father, Rahmi Sahindal had strong reservations on independent behavior of females in the family. “Their father laid down strict rules for his daughters. They must not “cross borderlines.” They were not to start “living the European way” and “must stay away from the society” (UW 41). Fadime violated these rules by trying to imbibe the Swedish way of life in her way of dressing, gaining higher education and even going out with friends. She was so deeply influenced by the western culture that she thought it to be her right to choose her life partner. These actions were considered a strict violation of the norms and rules of honor culture of her Kurdish society.

The rules and norms of honor culture of the traditional Kurdish society also demand absolute loyalty of individual members towards their community. An important consideration is that individual members should refrain from discussing their private life in public. Fadime violated this norm also. Wikan elaborates:

“But she would not announce her thoughts and feelings in the marketplace. In line with traditional Kurdish culture - with Middle Eastern tradition in general - one’s private life should be shut-off from the eyes of the world outside, that is, from people who do not belong to the immediate family or the wider circle of relatives. That is what her mother saw as Fadime’s main offense; she used the media to expose the hidden life of the family and, in that way, brought misery on them all” (UW 137).

Fadime’s action of bringing the family dispute before public was like washing one’s dirty linen in public. When such disputes become a subject of public knowledge, the honor of the male members of the family is considered to be besmirched. She talked to the media about the restrictions imposed on girls like her by their parents and in the process, brought the hidden life of her family and the entire Kurdish community before the Swedish people. Unni Wikan observes that “Fadime’s tragedy forces us to realize that our multicultural society now includes people with ideas about what is ‘private’ which dictate

that publicity should be avoided, whatever the cost. Shame can be coped with as long as it stays hidden. Humiliation can be endured, but only in privacy. Family conflicts can be resolved but only behind closed doors and through mediation” (UW 6). There is a clear demarcation between what is ‘private’ and what is ‘public.’ The rules for the same are to be followed in toto.

Fadime had to face the punishment for the actions that were against the honor culture of Kurdish society. She was murdered by her father, Rahmi Sahindal. He was forced to resort to take this extreme step to acclaim the so-called honor of the family. Fadime’s case highlights that to maintain their hold over the females in the family, men do not hesitate to take drastic action against females who violate the honor norms of their society. Men see it a threat to their position of power even in a foreign land. Unni Wikan asserts that “Murdering one’s own daughter - or a close family member - for the sake of honor is not a tradition that was ever part of European codes of honor, according to the historical records. But it is now. Honor killing, by which is meant murder of family member for the sake of collective honor has become a part of European reality” (UW 4). The honor killings that take place in Europe and other modern Western societies are common among immigrants, particularly those from the Middle-East and the South Asia.

In the Middle-East culture, parents are particularly strict regarding the dresses worn by girls and their moving out of their homes for socializing with friends. The immigrant girls seek support from their families to enjoy the freedom like their western counterparts but face a backlash even for nurturing such a desire. Wikan elaborates that “Young people with an immigrant background do not receive the support they should, apparently because of “their culture” and the ongoing cultural conflict” (UW 249). The parents instead of supporting their children, try to tie them in the shackles of culture and traditions. Cohan mentions that for these children, “perhaps honor is an old-fashioned notion” (Cohan 182). They consider the culture and traditions of their parents to be out of synchronism with the western culture. Judge affirms that “the old generation begins to perceive itself as the custodian of the social values and normative patterns, customs and traditions. Conversely, new generation considers these values and norms outdated” (Judge 154). The children belonging to the second and subsequent generations, being born and brought up in a foreign land, want to be a part of the new culture. They feel that if they do not become part of this culture, they would be side-lined and ridiculed by their fellow western children. They, therefore, perforce embrace the

western culture much easily along with its attributes like sexual freedom, feminism, and other behaviors. This faces opposition and backlash from the first-generation immigrants, most of whom are still tied to their age-old traditions and culture. The collision between the two opposing cultures results in tension and friction within the families and social groups. Wikan explains Fadime's rebellion against the repressive Kurdish culture. "I can understand...my parents, who have grown up in quite a different reality. This 'culture' my parents claim we must take care of-it's just nonsense. They're frightened to lose control of the family... Fadime believed that many immigrants find the contrast between their Swedish present and their past so great that they invent rules, which they call their "culture," to protect themselves (UW 166). This gives an idea of the strong patriarchal control that exist in traditional Kurdish society. The experiences of people who immigrated to the Western world are considerably different from that of their children who are either born or come to these countries when they are still very young. When immigrants move to an alien culture, they face new challenges. To escape these harsh realities of life, they come out with certain additional norms and rules, that they strongly link with their culture. Kullu and Ferrer corroborate that "International migration is an important life event and brings with it changes in the living environment- it shapes the experiences of the 'first generation'; in contrast, migration, as such, is not an issue for the members of the so-called 'second generation' because they never moved from one country to another. Further, among the first generation, family formation is largely completed by the time of migration for those who move at late adult age, while still in progress for those who move at younger ages" (Kullu, Ferrer 4). There is a feeling, particularly amongst the first-generation immigrants, that Western culture is not good as it lacks morality. All-out efforts are made by them to ensure that their children remain away from the impact of the Western way of life. Their social structure is built on the premise of the absolute loyalty of members as highlighted by Chiswick and Miller. "Immigrants from a particular origin tend to live in areas where others from the same origin live. Rather than distributing themselves across the regions of the destination in the same proportion as the native-born population. The result of this tendency to settle among others from their country of origin is the formation of ethnic concentrations or ethnic enclaves" (Chiswick, Miller 1). This pattern of concentration has a great social impact on immigrants. They believe that to remain within such confined groups is a sure shot way to pass on their ethnic culture to their offspring and prevent their children from getting corrupted by the Western culture.

The second-generation immigrants get a first-hand experience of their ethnic culture through their parents and elders. They also get an experience of the new culture of the place of immigration through interaction with other children in schools and colleges. Within their homes, they have an entirely different culture, and as soon as they walk out of their homes, the culture transforms completely. This has been explained by Wikan in Fadime's case. "In the beginning, I kept a balance between the Kurdish traditions and demands that Swedish society made on me. I felt enormously split and enormously confused. I was forced to lead a double life, trying at best I could to meet the expectations that the two cultures had of me as a young woman" (UW 227). They try to get themselves acquainted with the norms of both the cultures. They are required to cross the boundaries between the two cultures many times in their daily life and have to maintain a fine balance between the two. While the first-generation immigrants, like Rahmi Sahindal, strongly identify themselves with their ethnic culture, many of the second-generation immigrants, like Fadime, identify themselves equally with the two cultures, resulting in their better integration and assimilation. Since the level of assimilation in case of first-generation and second-generation immigrants are different, inter-generational cultural dissonance or conflicts over matters of culture between parents and children are very common.

Fadime's case also throws light on the dilemmas and fears experienced by the immigrants. These are greater in case of first-generation immigrants as compared to those faced by subsequent generations, who get better assimilated and integrated with the culture of their adopted homeland. This lack of proper integration of first-generation immigrants in the cultural set up of their adopted homeland is a major cause of turmoil in their lives, as they are not able to easily shed their identity with their original culture. Here Wikan has raised a pertinent query. "Another key question: for how long can someone who has left his or her original home be assumed to belong to its culture? Rahmi Sahindal had lived in Sweden for twenty years, almost half his life. After all those years away, would it be meaningful to regard his roots in traditional Kurdish culture as a mitigating factor?" (UW 181). Even after staying in a different country for so long, the immigrants still stick to their original customs and traditions. This may result in a "cultural clash" that affects the people of both the cultures at an individual level, as well as within society.

Wikan uses the words of Fadime to sum up the lives of immigrants in Sweden. "... to tell you about my experience of what it is like to live as

a foreign girl in Sweden, with its laws, customs, and culture. How hard it is to balance between the demands and expectations of one's family and the Swedish society, with its quite different values and attitudes" (UW 226). These immigrant people continue to navigate between the culture and traditions that they have inherited from their home country to the sparkling modern Western world, where they are forced to encounter new experiences every day. Galland and Lemel elaborate that "Modernization was seen as a typically occidental process that non-western could embrace only by abandoning their traditional cultures" (Galland, Lemel 153).

The rules and norms that are prescribed to be followed by immigrants are more severe for women and children. Wikan elaborates that "Fadime clarified that her parents having arrived in a foreign place, had invented rules and called them "culture" in order to control the girls" (UW 249). Men make most of the decisions and women are kept in the dark as males believe that the responsibility of women is limited to general household works like cooking, cleaning, looking after the needs of family members. The status of women is such that they consider all these restrictions to be perfectly fine. Wikan confirms that "Among Muslim women of faith- also in Sweden- there will be many, maybe a majority, who want to be veiled and think it perfectly proper that men make the decisions in the family and wider social matters" (UW 31). Women are themselves responsible for conferring a superior status on men and prefer to play second fiddle. They go by the dictates of men in their family. Geetha avers that "Being a man always means that one is rational, always in control, unemotional and consistently strong. Being female requires that she is patient, understanding emotionally expressive and compassionate...Both men and women strive to be as typical as possible. Convinced that these are their natural mode of being, often suppressing or downplaying contrary emotions" (Geetha 35).

Wikan explains that both Fadime and her parents were prisoners of their 'culture.' She brings to fore the Fadime's case, who dared to go public against the culture in which shame and honor were of utmost importance. "Socializing, which most Westerners would regard as innocent, counts as sexual in tradition bound communities. Being seen in a company of a boy might be enough. Reputation matters more than the truth. Young women have paid with their lives for flimsy tales about their flawed virtues. They were not given the chance to defend themselves" (UW 17). This culture was too demanding on Fadime, who had been brought up in the western world which is immune to these rigors of culture. She was firmly assimilated with the Swedish culture

which respected the independence and rights of women. She ultimately became a victim for dreaming to get the best out of it. Wikan goes on to add that “Fadime’s father is a victim too- a victim of a ‘culture’ demanding that he must be in charge, rule, control, punish; that he must accept no challenge to his honor, which is not just his own. He is only a stakeholder, someone who manages a share in the tribal honor- as everyone must for the sake of the tribe. The group has a stranglehold on the individual...Fadime’s mother is a victim too, another individual sacrificed on the altar of the collective. (UW 16-17). Fadime’s father was part of this culture which talked and practiced ‘power and control.’ It was about the rights of the collective over that of an individual. This culture was based on structures where survival of an individual rests on serving the system. Women do not have the right to oppose the decisions taken by their fathers, brothers or husbands. Fadime’s mother is also projected as being a victim of this culture as she was forced to sacrifice her daughter to go along with her husband’s wish. She was bound by the customs and traditions of her Kurdish society. Both the parents could not assimilate well with the Swedish culture although they had lived in Sweden for almost twenty years and became victims of their Kurdish culture.

The wide variance in the culture of the adopted homeland creates difficulty for immigrants to assimilate with the new culture because assimilation would mean moving away from the culture inherited by birth. Human nature is such that it does not accept change easily. Wikan makes it clear that “Culture and traditions matter a great deal and change only slowly” (UW 36). The result is that adjusting to a new culture is painfully slow. The immigrants are required to snap their ties with their historical and cultural roots. They have to be flexible in adapting to new ways of life. Korhonen has quoted Paige to highlight that “The process of adapting to a new culture requires ‘learners’ to become emotionally flexible in responding to the challenges and frustrations of cultural adaptation” (Korhonen 75). Wikan has quoted Swedish-Kurdish, Idris Ahmedi who insists, “The academics trick themselves when they ignore culture. They worry about stirring up racism. But the debate is meaningless if we don’t speak openly...This is not wild boxing but a tormented man’s despairing attempt to translate from one culture to another” (UW 19). In the process, their life continues to swing like a pendulum between their adopted homeland and their own country. The next generation being born and brought up as per the western culture, see the old values of their culture as restrictive and retrograde. Adaptation to the new culture is the key to survival for these immigrants, which they never really achieve because

of the strong influence of their own culture and traditions. This results in frustration among immigrants as their children often try to break the rules and norms stipulated by the culture of their parents. The Kurdish culture and the Swedish culture are in stark contrast to each other; Kurdish culture being closed within the community and Swedish culture being open and revolving around the needs and desires of everyone. Wikan explains that “Rahmi realizes that he is straddling a cultural divide; on one side the Swedish camp and on the other side, the Kurdish one” (UW 153). The cultural divide is a virtual barrier caused by cultural differences, that hinder interactions, and harmonious exchange between people of different cultures. As per Rosenblatt: “There will be many differences from individual to individual within a society, of course; but all will be shaped by reaction to the dominant pressures, the accepted habits, and the system of values, of that culture.” (Rosenblatt 460). The role of family and the community assumes significance in such cultures. In Rahmi’s case, the dominant pressure was that from his fellow Kurdish immigrants, who favored the practice of zero tolerance towards going against their culture.

The role of the western world in dealing with honor-related culture of the immigrants also requires emphasis. In the beginning, for the western world, the tradition of honor killing was unexpected, beyond their thinking. It was difficult for these people to fathom that people can resort to the killing of their daughters, wives, or even mothers in the name of honor. In an article by Mozab and Hassanpour on honor killing of Fadime Sahindal, the failure of the integration policy has been highlighted. “The government faced criticism for failing to integrate immigrants and for its policy of “double standards,” i.e. tolerance of male violence among (non-Western) immigrants and promotion of gender equality for the Swedish-born citizens” (Mozab, Hassanpour 56). Unni Wikan also mentions that “Fadime’s father is an example of failed integration, despite his history of working and his partial knowledge of Swedish language. More must be in place before we call someone “partly integrated.” It is probably a reflection of the overall failure of the integration process that the Scandinavian public debate has made “integration in the workplace” the most commonly used measure or indicator” (UW 235). The policy of multiculturalism practiced by the Swedish government indirectly supports the concept of patriarchy common in the culture of immigrants, which is against gender equality. This brings disparity between the immigrants and the Swedish-born people. The laws become dependent on an individual’s ethnicity. Wikan has exposed the system by highlighting that Fadime’s

murder brought to the fore the issue of immigrants' culture in Sweden, which is practicing multiculturalism:

“Was Fadime an example of successful integration? The Swedish minister for integration, Mona Sahlin, raised this question in a lecture she gave in Norway on May 14, 2002. She also raised another question: Was Fadime's father an example of poor integration? Sahlin's answers were respectively, “yes” and “yes partly.” Fadime was an example of successful integration because she had embraced the value of freedom and fought for it vigorously. Her father was an example of partial integration, because he had spent much of his working life in Sweden and worked in a firm that employed Swedes almost exclusively. Also, he knew that it was wrong of him to kill Fadime. In other words, he had acquired at least some idea of Swedish laws and regulations, even if not Swedish values” (UW 233).

The leading multiculturalist, Will Kymlicka explains that “Modern societies are increasingly confronted with minority groups demanding recognition of their identity, and accommodation of their cultural differences. This is often phrased as the challenge of multiculturalism” (Kymlicka 10). To cope up with the problems associated with Honour killings amongst the immigrants, many western countries like the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, France tend to have multiculturalism. It means that many cultures, rather than one national culture can co-exist peacefully within a nation. This concept was used by many western countries in dealing with immigrant communities. Wikan adds that “The composition of the immigrant population makes a difference, as does the country's stand on multiculturalism...only in Sweden is multiculturalism a national ideology. Sweden accords special value to the preservation of the collective culture of ethnic groups” (UW 245). Using this concept of multiculturalism, they failed to recognize unequal power structures and the existence of patriarchy within minority communities. This structure propagated the concept of honor and supported honor killing, which prevented better integration of the immigrants in the culture of their adopted homeland. A further aspect called liberal multiculturalism has now been added to this. Will Kymlicka in her hypothesis elaborates:

“States can adopt multiculturalism policies to fairly recognize the legitimate interests of minorities in their identity and culture without eroding core liberal - democratic values...normative theorists of liberal multiculturalism

typically assume, implicitly or explicitly, that justice for minorities through multicultural policies can be pursued without threatening core liberal–democratic values and without having to compromise on a society’s commitment to individual freedom, equal opportunity and social solidarity” (Kymlica 258).

Liberal multiculturalism in western countries allows immigrants to integrate with the culture of these countries by giving proper respect to the legislations of these countries.

Wikan has referred to Fadime’s case as well as that of many other girls in the Scandinavian and other Western countries to show the predominance of culture over human rights. She says:

“The tragedies of Fadime, Sara, and Pela teach us that “culture” must never take precedence over the individual’s basic human rights that respect for culture must always be secondary to respect for every human being’s integrity and welfare, and that culture is a product of human inventiveness. As a perception, a set of rules, cultural standards and ideas are in flux. However, people can “take over” culture, inscribe it on tablets of stone, and back its pronouncements with power” (UW 249).

The culture of these immigrant girls put umpteen of restrictions on them They do not have the right to take decisions on issues like marriage, divorce, education, way of dressing etc. The need is to give greater predominance to respect for individual human rights over the cultural practices and this is a major agenda of most of the Western countries. This will also be a step forward in better assimilation of immigrants in their new cultures.

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