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Was Pak social media star Qandeel a victim of dishonor or hypocrisy?

BY GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN on JULY 19, 2016 in ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES, SOUTH ASIA

Qandeel Baloch, a star of the social media, was barely 25 when she was strangled to death in Pakistan's Multan on July 16 by her own brother, Waseem Azeem, angered over her provocative public behavior that he felt had brought disrepute to their family.

He admitted to murdering her after his arrest. He said even though his sister was the family's main breadwinner, he could not help snuffing out her life as she lay asleep, having been sedated by him.

Azeem was upfront with the police when he said: "I was determined to either kill myself or kill her Money matters, but family honor is more important."

He added that he had been hugely embarrassed by Qandeel's "shameful actions" and could not bear the social taunting he had to face day in and day out.

Ironically, it was the same society which had encouraged Qandeel to touch unbelievable heights by lapping up her public sites, like Facebook where she is said to have had 750,000 followers.

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In many ways, these followers were thrilled seeing the kind of scandalous pictures she posted of herself — daringly dressed with those come-hither looks which drove men crazy and women raging with envy.

It was a classic case of hypocrisy in a society like Pakistan where people derived pleasure in private from Qandeel's visuals but were ruthless in demonizing her in public. Azeem was perhaps a victim of this dreadful community — which had two entirely contrasting faces and spoke in two very different languages.

Of course, Qandeel was as much a victim as Azeem was. Growing up in an atmosphere of extreme rigidity — where patriarchal tendencies were brutal, to say the least — she was just 17 when her parents pushed her into a loveless marriage that brought her a son, but virtually nothing else.



Qandeel Baloch

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Maybe, such compulsion propelled her to dare and even bare. She got out of the marital knot, probably through economic independence which she achieved by modeling in a nation which usually views such exhibitionism as some kind of sacrilege.

Azeem kept asking Qandeel to quit playing the seductress on stage — cat-walking in the skimpiest of outfits. But Qandeel had tasted freedom through such skin show and it was obviously bringing in money, and in plenty. She even bought a house for her parents who, after enjoying the creature comforts which Qandeel was offering, changed their attitude toward her. And they seemingly looked the other way when their daughter went wild.

She posted selfies on Instagram with a senior member of the clergy, Mufti Abdul Qavi. She was seen wearing his cap as they posed together. What do you expect to follow?

He was suspended from an important religious committee and the man was so bitter that he told CNN after her murder that “her death should be a lesson for all those who point fingers at someone’s honor.”

However, Qandeel had averred that it was on Qavi’s invitation she had gone to him, and this appears quite plausible for I do not think he could have to be coerced into a selfie situation — which brings us back to the hypocrisy angle.

But, yes, Qandeel did push the boundaries — drunk as she was with the kind of pampering which she enjoyed on the social platform. It can go to anybody’s head, more so in the case of Qandeel whose early years of social suffocation could have fired the rebel in her, a rebel that grew uncontrollably monstrous in later years.

I can think of another woman in Iran who also rebelled — though she did not meet Qandeel’s tragic fate. That brilliant actress called Golshifteh Farahani — who would soon be seen in Anup Singh’s Hindi film, *Song of Scorpions*, along with that illustrious actor, Irrfan Khan.

Golshifteh, who first came into my view through a brilliant performance in *The Patience Stone*, was really a haughty girl who gave Iranians a hard time. She protested against lack of heating in her Tehran school. She shaved her head when her parents insisted that she cover herself with a scarf. She rode a bicycle on the streets of the city like a boy when no girl was allowed to pedal.

She got married at 20 but soon ran away to Paris when the Iranian clergy blasted her for acting in a Hollywood movie with Tom Cruise. And she did not stay quiet in Paris. She posed nude for a magazine cover that drove the Iranian clergy mad. But then, I suppose, Paris offered her complete freedom, and probably she had no relative talking about honor.

Unlike Golshifteh, Qandeel could not escape, although she had made plans to leave Pakistan soon after Id-ul-Fitr — when death came knocking. Weeks before this, she had been getting death threats which some say may have been the handiwork of all those she displeased — Qavi included.

Qandeel came into public glare early this year when she said she would strip dance for Pakistan cricket captain, Shahid Afridi if he lead his team to victory in the World T20 match against India. And she posted a trailer of her stripping, promising the works after the win. This was indeed a tipping point in Pakistan and her Facebook page was blocked for a while.

When Pakistan lost, she turned her gaze toward Indian cricketer Virat Kohli. In a steamy video, she bluntly told the guy to leave his girlfriend, Indian actress Anushka Sharma. “Be with me”, Qandeel implored, describing Kohli as “very charming.”

She signed off the video with a kiss.

All this made her a sensation and attracted envious admiration from women in a country where men could be dominating bullies. But she was also reviled, most strongly I would think.

Hamna Zubair, the culture editor of the Pakistani newspaper, *Dawn*, told CNN that she had been lambasted for publishing pieces on Qandeel. One reader asked the editor if she would be “reporting from a brothel” next!

Qandeel, in the end, was actually foolish to assume that she could get away with such salacious scandals. Probably, the attention she got in the social media was like a heady cocktail of drugs that led her into a tunnel where she could not see the difference between delusion and reality.

The reality is harsh: 1,100 women were murdered in Pakistan in 2015 by their own relatives who felt that they had dishonored their families, according to the Human Rights Commission. The figure was 1,000 in 2014, and 869 in 2013. Clearly, we can see the deathly graph rising,

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Qandeel wanted this as well, but she may have gone a trifle too far, not stopping when the light was flashing red.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and Seoul Times.

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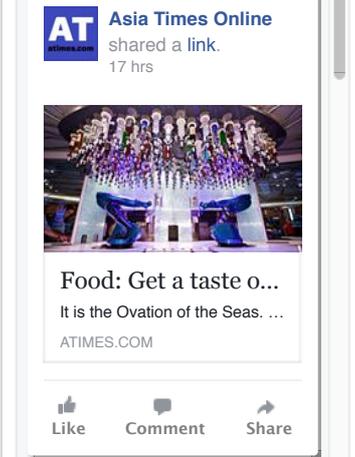
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