

Module 6: Violence Against Women & Children: Media Literacy Case Studies

6a The Case of Aqsa Parvez

6b The Sexual Assault Case at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate

6c Educators Guide to 6b (pdf)

| Being a Canadian Muslim Woman in the 21st Century



introduction

This unit helps to develop critical media literacy skills, by:

- examining the death of a 16-year-old Canadian-Pakistani teenager Aqsa Parvez, and analyzing how the politics of race, gender, religion, culture and class come into play
- addressing the question of cultural and patriarchal violence and “honour killing”
- examining the kinds of stereotypes and assumptions that underlie the media and public discussion of the case.

background: the tragedy

- On December 10, 2007, Aqsa Parvez was murdered by her father and brother. She was a 16-year-old Canadian-Pakistani teen living in Mississauga Ontario. She also went by “Axa.”
- According to media reports, Aqsa was in conflict with her religiously conservative family because she no longer wanted to wear the hijab (headscarf) and preferred to dress according to the standards of mainstream Canadian youth culture.
- Because of the conflicting pressures between the demands and expectations of her home life and life at school, Aqsa left home to live with family friends who were helping to mediate the tensions.



<http://www.aqsaparvez.com/>



http://www.torontosun.com/news/columnists/michele_mandel/2010/06/15/14397421.html

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background: the tragedy

- In September 2007, Aqsa told her school counsellor about her fear that her father would kill her. The counsellor arranged for her to stay in a shelter for a few days.
- After this, her parents reportedly eased some of their restrictions and let her wear non-traditional clothes to school. But other tensions remained and she continued to stay with family friends.
- On December 10, 2007, her father and brother picked her up from the school bus stop and returned to their home. Later that morning her father called the police to say that he had “killed his daughter.”



<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/story/2007/12/11/teen-attacked.html>

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background: the tragedy

- Aqsa was taken to the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, where she died later that day. The cause of death was “neck compression” or strangulation.
- Her father Muhammed Parvez and brother Waqas Parvez pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and received life sentences.
- Her father was reported as saying that he killed Aqsa because she refused to obey his demands: “My community will say, ‘You have not been able to control your daughter.’ This is my insult. She is making me naked.”
- The media dubbed this Canada’s first “honour killing,” a term used when women are killed to preserve the honour of the family.

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background: the tragedy

- Aqsa's death was labelled a "death by culture," where her ethnic and religious background was seen as the main cause. Yet violence against women is pervasive in all communities and societies.
- Reducing this tragedy to cultural violence instead of seeing it within the broad spectrum of domestic violence in Canada makes culture an excuse for patriarchal violence.
- It also does not allow for a more complex understanding of the situation that Aqsa faced. For example, what kind of peer pressure did she face at school to not wear the hijab? What standards of beauty must young girls conform to in society and in what way are these the product of the corporate fashion and beauty industries?

is “honour” the only possible motive?

Consider this:

- In Canada, there have certainly been cases where the cultural context is key to understanding crimes. In British Columbia, the argument about ethnicity and violence against women reached its peak more than a year-and-a-half ago, after a vicious spate of spousal violence that shook the Indo-Canadian community. It spurred the province's Attorney-General (Wally Oppal, an Indo-Canadian) to describe the incidents as “a cancer” and to observe that there was a disproportionate number of domestic assaults in the South Asian community.

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is “honour” the only possible motive?

“But that heightened cultural sensitivity may also be responsible for ascribing an honour-killing motive to textbook cases of domestic abuse. Consider the case of Shemina Hirji, a 40-year-old school principal who died in her Burnaby townhouse less than a week after she married 34-year-old Narinder (Paul) Cheema. Her husband was the prime suspect in the case, which was described in many reports at the time as an honour killing.”

“He committed suicide and was never charged, but considerable evidence emerged to show a broader criminal motive, including a recent history of bank fraud and financial troubles. He also had convictions for forcible confinement, uttering threats and kidnapping, related to a previous fiancée.”

Source: Craig Offman. (November 15, 2008). “Honour Killing: An Apt Description of a Murder with Cultural Overtones or an Inherently Racist Term?” National Post.

Muslim women's responses

“The assertion that Ms. Parvez's murder was because she was Muslim or due to Islam is both racism and Islamophobia.”

Farrah Khan, a member of a group for young Muslim women called Our Collective Dreams.

“The sad truth of the matter is that violence against women is a worldwide issue and if the media would care to look at the murder for what it was, rather than taking on the status of Western cultural superiority, they would see that violent acts such as this one occur much more in their own backyard in Canada.”

Idil Hyder, community organizer

police-reported family violence against children & youth

- Police-reported data for 2007 indicate that children and youth under the age of 18 were most likely to be physically or sexually assaulted by someone they knew (85% of incidents).
- Nearly 53,400 children and youth were the victims of a police-reported assault in 2007. About 30% of the assaults were committed by a family member.
- When children and youth were victims of family violence, a parent was identified as the abuser in nearly 6 in 10 incidents.
- Girls under the age of 18 reported higher rates of both physical and sexual assault by a family member than boys.
- In 2007, the rate of family-perpetrated sexual assault was more than 4 times higher for girls than for boys.

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police-reported family violence against children & youth

- Male family members were identified as the accused in a sizable majority of family-related sexual (96%) and physical assaults (71%) against children and youth.
- Homicides of children and youth (under the age of 18) represented about 9% of all homicides in 2007. Most child and youth homicide victims were killed by someone they knew.
- In 2007, 41% of child and youth homicides were committed by a family member, 27% by someone known to the victim but other than a family member, and 20% by strangers. The remaining 13% were unsolved. (NOTE: Numbers have been rounded off for convenience.)
- Parents were the perpetrators in most child and youth homicides committed by family members. Fathers (54%) were more likely than mothers (34%) to be the perpetrators.

Source: Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile (2009). (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-224-X).

examining media representations of the Aqsa Parvez case

- There were conflicting reports about the nature of Aqsa's struggle with her family. Her friends argued that they clashed over the hijab, but the family friends she was staying with said that there were deeper family problems.
- Read the articles cited at the end of this unit and examine the various viewpoints presented. Whose voices are featured and whose voices are missing in narrating the events surrounding Aqsa's life and death?
- What role might racism play in shaping these accounts? Would the media coverage and framing be different if Aqsa was white?

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examining media representations of the Aqsa Parvez Case

- What concerns were raised about Canadian multiculturalism? Are these concerns valid or legitimate?
- While culture is reported as a primary cause of Aqsa's death, consider what other factors may lead to domestic violence in Canada and to violence against children and youth. Why is culture not identified as the cause for most cases of violence against women or children and youth if they are from the dominant culture?
- Is Aqsa Parvez's murder unique to Muslims?

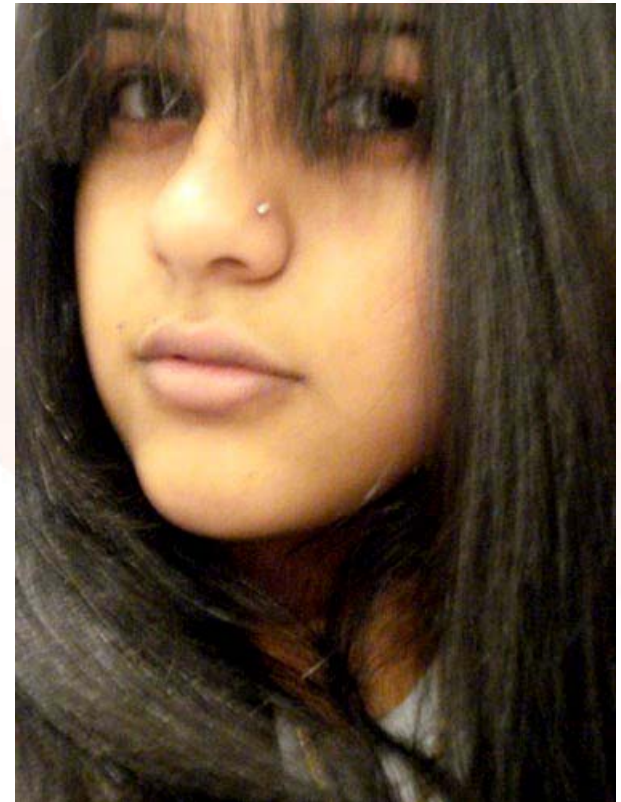
media articles

- Aqsa just wanted to be herself – *Mississauga.com*
<http://www.mississauga.com/news/article/834043--aqsa-just-wanted-to-be-herself>
- The double life of Aqsa Parvez – *National Post*
<http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/toronto/archive/2007/12/12/the-double-life-of-aqsa-parvez.aspx>
- Teen's death had nothing to do with Islam: imam – *CTV.ca*
http://toronto.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20071213/muslim_girl_death_071213/20071213?hub=TorontoHome
- The immigration debate we don't want to have – *Globe and Mail*
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/the-immigration-debate-we-dont-want-to-have/article1606855/>
- Girl, interrupted – *Toronto Life*
<http://www.torontolife.com/features/girl-interrupted/>

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media articles

- *Aqsa's last days – National Post*
<http://www.canada.com/topics/news/national/story.html?id=fcb10ecb-9644-4f79-8f03-edeb0b398477c>
- *There is no honour in killing – Kingston Whig-Standard*
<http://www.ccmw.com/documents/WHIG/20090808.pdf>



<http://sheikyermami.com/2010/06/17/aqsa-parvez-honor-killing-was-not-really-an-honor-killing-because/>