

Rooted in Silence: The Hermeneutical Injustice of The Urdu Word(s) for Rape

ABSTRACT

Multiple conceptualizations of the word for rape in Urdu are rooted in notions of honour. The most well-known terms, such as *zina-bil-jabr*, *ismat-dari* and *aabru-raizi* function as interchangeable words for rape, but translate into iterations of ‘dishonouring’. Publicly, the Urdu word used to address rape was first introduced in the 1980s – *zina-bil-jabr* – which translates into adultery/fornication by force. In the wake of introducing *zina-bil-jabr* within the legal framework of Pakistan’s Penal Code, a huge movement of women rose to protest. Since then, the words used for rape have iterated from *zina-bil-jabr* but have not made a sustainable transition to a term that does not function on notions of honour. In this paper, I borrow the concept of hermeneutical injustice from Miranda Fricker’s work and argue, that the iterations for the word ‘rape’ in Urdu are a reflection of the social, political, legal and personal understanding of how rape is perceived. Specifically, I aim to analyze the association of honour in the word ‘rape’ as a reflection of the situated honour within a woman’s body and positionality which not only i) provides an ill-fitted meaning to conceptualize rape, but ii) prevents, or makes it harder to understand, rape without the connotations of honour.

Through analyzing the reproduction of words used to conceptualize rape, often by epistemic agents in dominant roles (e.g. men in legal or social contexts), I trace the notions of honour as heavily intertwined in the social understanding of women’s experiences within Pakistan, especially in the occurrences of rape or sexual abuse. As Fricker mentions in their article, this is not to avoid the material and ontological reasons that relate the concept of honour and victim-blaming or silencing of women, rather to analyze the hermeneutical context in which such understandings cluster around epistemology. Drawing from the etymology for the Urdu words for rape and their connection to notions of honour, I trace the effect of this epistemological relationship in the broad and narrow perspectives on the lives of women. To make the argument that the words for rape in Urdu, focusing on *zina-bil-jabr*, is a form of hermeneutical injustice, I will draw from Fricker’s reasoning through the examples of Carmita Wood and Wendy Sanford. To investigate how words for rape in Urdu disadvantage women as epistemic agents, constituting to hermeneutical injustice, I will trace the legal, social and personal contexts in which this form of injustice manifests.

References

Fricker, M. (2011). *Epistemic injustice: power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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