

# Saraiki Proverbs Related to Runaway Women

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## Abstract

*The use of proverbs in the Saraiki language shows different male attitudes towards women especially 'the runaway'. This research-based study is meant to highlight Saraiki proverbs related to runaway women and the negative attitudes they put forward declaring them careless and disobedient. There is a presumption that Saraiki-speaking women are hard working and less demanding. These proverbs present an ideal of Saraiki women as being very tolerant to the cruelties and hardships they face in the name of honor. Proverbs are mostly considered to reflect this taken-for-granted wisdom. This study will explore how these proverbs are deployed and what kinds of consequences they have both positive or negative.*

## Introduction: Saraiki Proverbs

Proverbs are a literary genre used all over the world 'expressing in physical and abstract terms people's understanding of their surroundings' (Ndungo 2002; 64). According to Madumulla (1995, xii), 'proverbs are said to express the collective wisdom of people implies that they constitute the philosophy of the people reflecting their modes of thinking, embodying their traditional values and means of safeguarding them' (see also Ennaji 2008). However, this paper argues that proverbs are human constructs and thus not immutable although they represent the dominant 'wisdom'. There is extensive literature found which illustrates how gender is socially constructed through proverbs (Granbom-Herranen 2010; Hussein 2009; Kerschen 2000) and the power of tradition embodied in the proverbial expression (Ennaji, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, Saraiki proverbs (*akhaanrr*) are the sayings of elders that are meant to convey wisdom and usually are expressed in a short sentence. Cultural beliefs are reflected through these proverbs.

Saraiki proverbs are thousands in number and continue to play an important role in deploying cultural norms. These are thought to impart great wisdom, philosophy and the basic principles of life. The proverbs in Saraiki language tell us the story of its norms, culture and traditions. The daily life of its people is expressed in them. Saraiki proverbs relate to the themes of truthfulness and justice along with more mundane matters such as the weather, crops, fairs, leisure, and the interests of everyday life. These proverbs also include expressions related to the domestic life of women along

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with highlighting the ideal individual qualities of men and women. The proverbs also reflect the past and provide advice for the future<sup>2</sup>.

Proverbs in the Saraiki language reflect patriarchal social norms and thus biased social constructions of gender. These norms are based on the concept of male superiority and control. Therefore women who deviate from or resist this control are negatively portrayed. Conversely, the social realities of Saraiki have changed over the last two centuries. Women play an important role in socio-economic development. In the rural areas women increasingly play an important role in the agricultural sector. In the urban areas given their access to education and to employment, a considerable number of Saraiki women are active today in jobs related to the public and private sectors. Saraiki women nowadays have evolved considerably, and there are now growing numbers of women doctors, engineers, economists, professors, lawyers, judges, ministers, etc.

While they contribute significantly to development, women's socio-economic situation has hardly improved and gender equality is far from being achieved. The ratio of run-away women is increasing day by day: in a conversation with a practicing advocate he informed that every day there are cases of run-away women, and it has never been like this before. Though the Pakistani government has enacted several laws concerning violence against women, which is one of the biggest causes of women running away; these laws never reach the rural women. The phenomenon of run-away women can be seen as a sign to break male domination and control.

In Saraiki rural areas, runaway women often approach the elder woman (*waderi mai*) of their area. This elder woman takes the matter into her hands and attempts to resolve the issue informally after ensuring the security of the runaway by her father, brother or husband. Some runaways approach the government crisis centre known as Daar-ul-amaan where again she is often met with a series of crises. Only a few have the courage to go back to their family homes on their own. In the most extreme circumstances, runaway women can be killed by their family members or may commit suicide in order to escape social stigma. However, it should be noted that the treatment of runaways varies from area to area in the Saraiki-speaking community. It also differs between the classes. It varies from community to community family to family and even person to person.

Therefore Saraiki proverbs do not represent today's women's reality in Saraiki society. Proverbs represent archaic discourses on women, which go back to 19th century. Traditional male power and dominance is embodied in proverbial expressions. In this paper eight proverbs directly related to runaway women are selected to show how strongly proverbs are opposed to the idea of women running away from home. Rather, proverbs encourage submission and obedience in women.

In the Saraiki language, some proverbs mainly focus on those women who deviate from societal norms. The depictions of these women are of particular concern in this paper. The study found that Saraiki proverbs are inherently biased against women. A number of women interviewed and the closely-examined data showed that the Saraiki proverbs are intended to reinforce male dominance to women and focus on their conduct within the family in particular. They are told to take care of

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2 Mughal, Shaukat. (1992) *Siraiki Akhaan*, Preface to First Vol. 1st Ed. Jhok Publishers and Printers Multan, Pakistan.

their father, brother, husband and sons during the entire course of life. Saraiki language plays a vital role in this socializing process, with Saraiki proverbs used as tools to reinforce these cultural ideals.

Scholars like Shaukat Mughal (three volumes 1992, 2005 & 2009) and Syeda Anjum Gillani (1997) in their collections of Saraiki proverbs have conducted great explorations and translated the same with explanations. Their explanations regarding the proverbs aimed at runaway women, which focus on issues related honor, disobedience and carelessness.

### Social and Legal Norms Influenced by Proverbs

In general running away is used as a last effort by women and girls in order to escape a repressive situation. The reunification of the runaway women depends upon the conduct of society and the family towards her. Societal attitudes towards runaway women are best expressed in Saraiki proverbs.

### Proverbs Showing Runaway Does Matter to Honor

1) *Ap gaiyoun te ap ayoun qadar vanjaeyou ranna da, patt lahaeyou babay di te nakk vadhaeyou amma da* (Shaukat 1992:25)

(She, who left (runaway with wrong person) and returned herself, she disgraced all the women and caused disrespect to her father and mother in society and is a black spot (kalank ka teeka) to her family).

2) *Ap gai te apay ai qadar vanjaes ranna da, darhi patties babay di te chonda munneis amma da* (Shaukat 1992:25)

(She, who left herself and returned home (after civil marriage), she disgraced all the women and caused disrespect to her father and mother in society. She and her family are left with no honor).

Proverbs 1 and 2 states that a woman who runs away from home is left with no honor in the family even if she eventually returns. She has disgraced all the women in the society and brought disrespect to her father and mother. Even if returns, is regarded as a black spot to her family and has disrespected (*patt lahaeyou*) her father and her mother (*nakk vadhaeyou*). 'Patt' (respect) and 'nakk' (nose) are two prominent words in the Saraiki language and both are related to honor. The act of running away by a woman affects the honor of the entire family.

A beard (*daarrhi*) is considered to be a symbol of respectability in Saraiki society because of its association with Islam. Often people who lose a bet, for example, are forced to shave their beards as a sign of their defeat. Similarly, in the case of women, if a woman loses a bet or breaks with social conventions, she can be punished by having a little portion of her hair shaved or cut by scissors or have her face blackened. Hence, the act of running away by a woman is seen as being comparable to having made her father shave his beard and mother cut her hair before the eyes of society.

Saraiki proverbs reinforce the idea of women's subordination. Proverbs 1 and 2 describe a woman as an imbecile (*kam aqal*) but at the same time, she is regarded as the family's honor (*ghar di izzat*).

During discussions on these proverbs, a woman spoke out saying, ‘a brother, family’s honor relates to a woman and a woman’s honor is associated with her home and she better remain at home’ (*bhira, khandan di izzat aurat nal hy te aurat di izzat gher nal hy*).

Another woman confirmed what was stated in proverbs 1 and 2 stating that, ‘a woman has no respect other than the family’ (*ranna di gher tu bahir kai pat ni*). She further said:

If a woman goes out and travels alone, she also has no respect (*kallhi zaal di aj day zamanay ich koi izzat ni*) nowadays, then you can guess (wal tu ap samijh ghin) that if a woman leaves her home and is a runaway then what is she left with? And how will her parents be treated in society? Left with no honor (*Kakh jogi izzat ni bachdi*) and the father cannot lift his eyes up (*peo akh chanvanrr joga ni ranhdi*). When a woman goes out against the will of her family and becomes a runaway, if she returns by herself, she has no honor (*autri rann di kehi izzat jairrhi ap gai te ap gal phir te murr ai*).

These responses from women highlight the fact that In Saraiki areas, a woman is expected to altar everything for the sake of the family’s honor. She has to sacrifice her will, her wishes, and her share in property and even her consent to marry the person of her choice.

### Proverbs Showing Runaways are Worthless and Belongs to None

3) *Babar nikhti kakh di, andir bethi lakh di.* (Shaukat 1992:74)

(She, who went out (runaway from home), is of no value, whereas the one who remains inside is worth millions).

4) *Nikhti rann tareejhay di.* (Shaukat 2004: 257)

(Runaway woman belongs to the third one)

5) *Rulli rann da har koi saein.* (Shaukat 2009: 139)

(The woman lost is claimed by everyone)

Proverbs 3, 4 and 5 clearly express the dominant societal attitude towards runaway women. A proverb 3 state that the one who goes out of home should be disrespected while the one who remains inside home should be honoured. In Saraiki areas a woman is expected to tolerate cruelty rather than leaving home, and if she so does, she is considered to have committed a sin and to be of no worth. While, there also is a very famous saying that, ‘To tolerate cruelty is a severe cruelty,’ but this is generally only applied to men. An elder woman, Sardar Mai, said:

A runaway ruins her honor as well as that of her parents when she steps out of her home against the will of her parents. Further if she returns, she remains good for none (*jay o pichan Val aaway taan v o kahein kam di ni ranhdi*). It is better she dies

somewhere (*changa hy kithaein mer khap vanjay*) because no one will accept her as wife. She is useless after she is honorless (*izzat nai taan kujh nai*). The woman who left home is ultimately left with nothing (*jairrhi gharon gai o aslon gai*).

The same mentality is also expressed in proverbs 1 and 2.

Proverbs 4 and 5 state that a runaway woman is disowned by her family and the society she belongs but belongs to the third one. This 'third one' (*tareejha*) can be best explained as any other person (*her koi*) who can provide her with shelter, food and security and in return may have his demands fulfilled as she has become his property. The phrase '*rulli rann*' (lost woman) in proverb 5 expresses the idea that a woman who has left her home is now regarded as a lost woman and can be claimed by every person who finds her.

This was confirmed by Ata Elahi, who is from a field working family residing in a village called Mondon situated in Mailsi, which is a sub-division of Multan. Her daughter Bubli left home with her cousin Murtaza and did not return home for many days. Ata Elahi and all the family members conducted a formal search for them but in vain. One day Bubli and Murtaza returned and took shelter in the house of Mian Qamar Zaman, the elder person in whose fields both the families used to work. Ata Elahi and Nawaz disclosed before the *panchayat*:

This girl Bubli does not belong to us (*Bubli hunrr asadi kujh ni lagdi*) as she is of no use to us now (*ay asaday kahein bha di kani*). She is nothing to us and we disown her from our family (*asaday tu bahir hy ay hurr*). She may live with she wants (*bhaveni jainday nal merzi vanj vassay*). But we had brought her up so we must be compensated from Murtaza.

She also stated that, 'We don't care whether she has married to Murtaza or not but this is not our concern and she is no one to us. It is impossible for us to take her back as no one else would marry her (*asaday ichu hunrr eku konrr pernesi*)'. Thus, she was left to live with her runaway partner, and she is now the mother of three children.

When proverbs 1 to 5 were discussed during field work, most of the women expressed their feelings in these words: 'the woman who left her parents can leave any one else (*Jairrhi rann maa peo di ni thai o kahein bay di k thesi*)'. Another said, 'the one who dishonored his parents, how will she protect the honor of anyone else (husband) (*jis mai peo maa di laaj ni rakhi o bay khein di k patt rakhesi*). The woman who didn't care her family, would herself die wandering (*jayin khandan di pagg roli hy o ap e ruldi mersi*)'. This mindset reflects the ideas about runaway women put forward in Saraiki proverbs. Women and girls generally run away because they are deprived of some right or are forced to do something against their will. These Saraiki proverbs provide only the single aspect of the issues but do not provide any resolution. Rather, these proverbs criticize and make fun of women who run away.

## Proverbs Showing Runaways as Faithless, Characterless and Useless

6) *Bzari rann da keha etbar.* (Shaukat 1992: 60)

(A runaway woman is not trustworthy)

7) *Badshakli hovay, badamli na hovay.* (Shaukat 1992: 59)

(An ugly woman is much better than the one with bad deeds.)

8) *Badkirdar rach vendi hy, badzaban nai rachdi.* (Shaukat 1992: 59)

(A characterless woman can be lived with but not the one with bad tongue.)

Proverbs 6, 7 and 8 very clearly describe character as being more important than beauty in Saraiki culture. The phrase '*bzari rann*' in proverb 6 stands for the woman who performs for money, whether a dancer or a prostitute, but in proverb 6 it means the woman who loves money and can do anything for it. Due to societal restrictions this woman is considered to be a runaway. She is disregarded in the Saraiki culture as a *bzari rann* and is not considered trustworthy.

## Male Female Discrimination Developed Through Proverbs

A runaway woman is considered to be untrustworthy if she returns. She is not welcomed as warmly as a runaway man. In fact, this discrimination is evidenced by the fact that I did not find a single Saraiki proverb that mentioned male runaways. When I asked my respondents about this, most of the men and women answered that when a male leaves home, the feelings are different than those when a female runs away. For example, Kaneez, a woman field worker whose son had left home said, 'What can I say to my son? He has returned and it's worth a million (*putr jo thiya vat k akkhijay, pichan murr aye eho lakh hy*). When I asked the same of another woman, Sheemo, whose daughter left home in the night and had not returned, she expressed her feelings in these words, 'When a daughter leaves home, she deserves to be killed (*dhi hovey te gharon bhajjay, banda gichi na ghutt sattay*). What has she left with us to let her live with us again? (*us asada pichan k rakha ay jo assan oku rakhon*)'. When asked why there is such a difference between the same act being committed by a son and a daughter she says, 'A son is a son and a daughter is a daughter. There is no comparison between a son with daughter (*dhi dhi hondi ay te putr putr, dhi da putr nal keha jorr*).

A runaway girl, Sibgha, returned home after getting married to the boy of her own choice after he abandoned her in a rented room in Karachi a few days after they were married. She says she was only fourteen when her mother wanted her to get engaged to her nephew. 'But I refused and I said, I will marry to person of my own choice. My mother said, (*vanj*) go (*mal mukala te dal dala*) blacken your face. The same happened to me and I ran away with a boy, who never returned home, and now I am nineteen and no one is ready to marry me. I think that was a kind of curse of my mother.'

Another girl, Sheemo, left her home just because she could not live freely due to the restrictions of her three brothers. She says, 'We were two sisters, and I always hated when everything was to be done according to the will of my brothers and father. My feelings were always hurt. So, one day after a big quarrel, I secretly left home, and I first went to a friend of mine. After two days my friend's mother came to know the situation, and she threw me out of her home saying 'don't spread dirt in my house (*meday ghar gand na macha te haya nal nikal vanj*).' She further said, 'Look at your face and then your character (*shakalon kaidi bholi te amlaan di goli*).' I was left with no option but to return home. My father, mother and brothers cursed at me and I had no value at home (*ghar ich medi kai qadar na reh gai*). Everyone called me called a 'runaway' (*saray meku nasokirr sadeinday han*). No one ever understood my problem, and I was never given my God-given rights.'

In all the conversations about runaway women, the same ideas put forward in Saraiki proverbs were expressed by almost all the women. This confirms the impact of proverbs on the creation of cultural and social norms. The feelings expressed by the families of the runaways and the words used in their statements show that the use of proverbs is common. The study also found that the proverbs are not only used in their original form, but also words taken from the proverbs are often used, which demonstrates how proverbs have filtered into everyday language and conversations.

### Conclusion: Proverbs and the Status of Runaway Women

The aforementioned proverbs establish the dominant ideas in Saraiki culture regarding runaway women. Women who run away are given a secondary status according to these proverbs, being viewed as a stain on the honour of her family. A woman is victimized firstly inside her home, and being a runaway, she later faces cruelty of society. She is not only the victim of men but is equally humiliated by the women in her home or in the women in the crisis centre.

The issue of runaways is very sensitive in Saraiki areas, and the proverbs do not provide an avenue to deal with the underlying causes of this problem. Rather, these proverbs are used frequently to dishonor runaways even by their loved ones. These proverbs in Saraiki language foreshadow the difficulties women will face in society if they run away. They are often maltreated, sexually harassed, sold into sex work, physically and mentally tortured in crisis centres or at the hands of whoever they meet. Women leave home when their rights are violated, but they continue to face violations even after. Where can they go and where can they live? Running away is a result of a woman's helplessness at home, and returning is a result of the severity of society outside the home. Thus Saraiki proverbs, which continue to have a great deal of influence in Saraiki language and culture, are used to taunt women and compound this severity whereas at the same time these proverbs indicate the hidden miseries they face inside and outside the home.

However, like all cultures, Saraiki culture is not static, and people are working towards social change from within. One possible means of overcoming the negative messages deployed by proverbs is through their creative deconstruction. For example, Helen Yitah provides interesting examples of reconstructing anti-women proverbs by invoking the authority of other proverbs to support an alternative view (2009). Finally, proverbs are themselves changing, which may provide new avenues for social change toward the achievement of gender equality in Saraiki culture. This is an area that warrants further research.

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