

Exploring the Age Old Tradition of *Haq Bakshish* (Marriage to Quran) in *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz

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Abstract

Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* explores the tyrannical patriarchal customs and the appropriation of Islam to gratify and serve feudalism in the modern-day Sindh, Pakistan. A woman as represented by Shahraz in her fiction is likely to confront the precarious chemistry of religion, traditions and female subordination. This research study provides an in depth discussion on the age old tradition of *Haq Bakshish* or marriage to the Quran prevalent in Sindh and some parts of Southern Punjab in Pakistan. Marriage to Quran is a hushed up tradition primarily practised in the elite feudal families of Sindh, where marrying women to the holy book of the Muslims instead of men is a way to preserve and keep the ancestral land within the family. This tradition is unIslamic to the core but is practiced in the name of religion (Chaudhary, 2011), where women are made to renounce the right to marry by their own fathers, brothers and grandfathers. The women in this context are, "shackled to the centuries-old traditions and customs" and have no say in such matters (Shahraz, 2001, p.69).

Keywords: feudalism, *Haq Bakshish*, Pakistani Fiction, religion, tradition.

A number of postcolonial societies have men who act as supreme species exhibiting absolute power and control at social, cultural and political levels whereas the position of women is weak and highly dependent on men. Pakistan is no exception to it. Pakistani society is also feudalistic in its structure where male dominance is evident in every aspect of life (Zaidi, 2012). *The Holy Woman* highlights the rural world where the feudal class reigns supreme. Pakistani society is traditionally a hierarchal society in which the feudal class has had privileges, benefits and resources at their disposal (Siddiqui, 2011). This class controls vast acres of land and their lifestyle is marked by leisure and easy acquisition of money. In the layered Pakistani society the feudal class holds a significant and substantial power. This privileged class is very adept at using or manipulating religion to suit its vested interests. Even when religion does not have a very strong basis in the life of the people, it has been used by the feudal class to perpetuate its power and position. Mostly, the feudal class' utmost concern seems to be to keep its landed property intact by any means possible. And for this purpose it can even supersede and undermine religion, culture, and the institutions of

family and marriage. In the novel *The Holy woman* when Jafar dies, Habib Khan is distraught primarily because of losing his only son and then also as he loses his only male heir he is very perturbed about the vast acres of land that belong to his family. The prospect of his ancestral land going to outsiders, whom his daughters will be marrying later, is unacceptable. He declares that he is not going to hand over his lands, "to some stranger who just happens to marry my daughter" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 66). His father, Siraj Din, also shares the same sentiments when it comes to inherited ancestral property and lands. According to Siddiqui it was this fear and the desire to keep the inherited land intact that led the feudal patriarchs to devise an ingenious scheme in rural Sindh and some parts of Southern Punjab (2011). This scheme and fool proof strategy is the custom or tradition of *Haq Bakshish* or marriage to the Quran which has been prevalent in Sindh and some parts of Southern Punjab for ages now. An article titled "Married to Quran" published in *Asharq Al-Awsat*, an international pan-Arab daily newspaper, delineates that Quran marriages were, "first devised to deny women their rights of inheritance and out of fear of property being passed on

to outsiders through the daughters or sisters (i.e. their spouses or children)” (2007). *Haq Bakshish* in its literal sense means to renounce the right to marry. Shahraz sums up this age old tradition as:

It has happened for generations amongst a certain class of people in remote parts of Sind – and is very much a hushed affair. Their traditions are very strong. Nobody can stand up to these people. They are very powerful and have great influence over the local community. Their womenfolk, in particular, have little or no independence or autonomy (Shahraz, 2001, p. 120)

The women in this context are, “shackled to the centuries-old traditions and customs” and have no say in such matters (Shahraz, 2001, p. 69). This tradition in particular is mostly followed by the Syeds, “assumed to be the descendants of the Holy Prophet’s family through Fatima, His daughter” (Chaudhry, 2011, p. 411). They are somewhat hesitant to marry their women into non-Syed families and so on not finding appropriate matches within their respective families they marry off their daughters or sisters to the Quran (“Haq Bakshish: No Right to Wed,” 2007). Besides, this tradition is also followed

by some other important and rich feudal families belonging to the aforementioned areas. In a news article “Married to the Quran” Uzma Mazhar reports that:

... A large number of feudals in Sindh had married their daughters to the Quran... In Sindh, MPA Shabbir Shah’s sister, ex-minister Murad Shah’s sister and two daughters, three daughters of Mir Awwal Shah of Matiari, daughters and sisters of Sardar Dadan and Nur Khan of the Lund tribe, nieces of Sardar Ghulam of Mahar tribe, and the daughters of the Pir of Bharchundi Sharif, were all married to the Quran to prevent their share of the land going to them and thus avoid redistribution of land. (2003)

The above report highlights that the families mentioned are either Syeds, or locally prominent elite families. It has been reported that a number of prominent political families in Sindh have been practicing this custom but it is mostly denied by the people concerned (“Haq Bakshish: No Right to Wed,” 2007).

A generally held view about the main reason behind these marriages is the preservation of land or keeping the landed property within the family. As Chaudhary puts it, “in common opinion a woman’s marital link to the

holy book is the result of a family's miserliness, i.e., the intention to save the real estate and other property from being transferred to outsiders" (2011, p. 412). It is said that in this way the family is able to hold on to the property or the land, which otherwise will have to be given to the daughters or sisters when they are married. J M Bedell writes, "Haq Bakshish takes place when a woman's male guardian decides to keep her share of the family property rather than allow her to marry and see the property given to her new husband" (p. 56).

Generally in these types of marriages, the women are asked to pledge their lives and themselves to the learning and memorizing of the Holy Quran. Afterwards the concerned families arrange a ceremony to formally marry the woman to the holy book, "a girl places her hand on the Quran and takes an oath that she is married to it until death" (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2007). The news article titled "Haq Bakshish: No Right to Wed" highlighting one such ceremony tells of how Zubaida Ali, a middle aged woman, witnessed her cousin Fareeba (25 years old) becoming a Quran bride. She was traditionally dressed up as any other bride with a red wedding dress, gold jewellery and henna patterned

hands and feet and the ceremony was like any other marriage ceremony with guests, music and all the related festivities. The only thing lacking was a groom and the whole thing felt strange and tragic to Zubaida. Another accompaniment of the ceremony is the draping of a black veil on the Quran bride signifying the completion of her image and role as a holy woman. For Zarri Bano also one such "veiling ceremony" or marriage to the Quran ceremony is organised in the novel (Shahraz, 2001). The house is decorated with hundreds of small colourful lights, a lot of guests are invited to the ceremony, a large trousseau of expensive clothes, jewellery and other gifts is prepared and put on display and exquisite feasts are arranged. The hall where the ceremony takes place is adorned with balloons, colourful lights and streamers, bouquets of fresh flowers, a big red Persian silk carpet, rows of velvet backed chairs, mahogany coffee tables and velour backed chaise longue. Zarri Bano is made to wear a red chiffon bridal outfit, gold necklace with matching dangling earrings and lots of gold bangles in both her hands. Like a typical bride her hands are also adorned with henna patterns making her a, "mocking bridal image"

(Shahraz, 2001, p. 141). Later she is handed a black veil, a *burqa* to be worn over all the finery. The veil then becomes her second skin as she is now to wear it at all times. The narrative through this tradition of *Haq Bakshish* also signifies the authority and control the feudal class in Pakistan exercises over its women.

Although Habib Khan loves his eldest daughter, Zarri Bano, dearly but like a true patriarch he wants to have complete control over her life just like he has complete control over his lands, “alongside our land, our wives and daughters, our izzat- our honour – is the most precious thing in our lives” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 37). Shahzada, Zarri Bano’s mother knowing she can’t do anything for her daughter, says to her husband, Habib Khan:

I am just a puppet, a mere worthless woman to do your bidding. You and your father are the puppeteers, Habib. You hold my daughter’s fate in your hands. What choice do I have? I can only swing and dangle along in whichever direction you pull and manoeuvre my strings. (Shahraz, 2001, p.71)

The above quoted lines very aptly highlight the relationship between a man and a woman in a patriarchal society in general and between the

patriarchs and their victims in the narrative of *The Holy Woman* in particular. Shahzada calls herself a mere puppet in the hands of men (her husband and father-in-law), the puppeteers. Indeed it is, “Habib – the master puppeteer in this macabre theatre” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 153). Zarri Bano also uses the puppet imagery for herself while talking to her mother, “you and father have brutally stripped me of my identity as a normal woman and instead reduced me to a role of a puppet. I am, he said, to do his bidding” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 87). To delineate the craft of puppeteering its pertinent to understand the role of the puppeteer, who is considered to be a person that manipulates or controls an inanimate object known as a puppet which might be shaped or structured like a human being, or an animal or some mythical creature, or another object so as to create the illusion of the puppet being alive. The difference in the case of women being puppets in the hands of men is that they are very much animate and alive but the phenomenon of them being controlled and manipulated by men renders them powerless and helpless thereby reducing them to mere puppets that are inanimate and lifeless. Women in patriarchal societies are like such

puppets in the hands of men who control and manoeuvre their lives and decisions. *The Holy Woman*, by Shahraz, encapsulates the manipulation and exploitation women face in the name of religion and traditions under patriarchy. The traditional images of puppet and puppeteer thus highlighted are to put forward the subjugated lives of women in the feudal backdrop (Siddiqui, 2011). The novel highlights how the powerful social structures and feudal customs restrict women, transforming them into passive victims. These customs and traditions are difficult to challenge as they are often nurtured, strengthened and kept alive through violent and unjust actions centred on women. Zarri Bano, the protagonist of the novel, is a greatly loved daughter by her father but even then she becomes a target of his domination (Zaidi, 2012).

Centuries-long traditions of submission to the patriarchs have conditioned these women to endless obedience and compliance. This has in turn further strengthened the patriarchal structures that for the most part work against the interests of women. As David Ghanim in his book, *Gender and Violence in the Middle East*, elucidates:

Patriarchy tends to tolerate female power as long as foundations of the patriarchal gender structure remain intact. Within the patriarchal structure, female power can take the form of resistance, subversion or compliance, without implying that these are mutually exclusive. By cultivating female power women play an essential role in supporting the endurance of patriarchal social structures. (2009, p. 12)

Shahzada's threat of never forgiving him for their daughter's misfortune and her manifestation of sorrow and grief only add poignancy to her inability, incapacity and helplessness to do anything for Zarri Bano. She highlights her marginalised position in deciding family matters when she calls herself a mere puppet to do her husband's bidding, "as a woman, she was of no consequence-her opinion counted for nothing. A law unto themselves, men's words were commands, and they were born to be obeyed" (Shahraz, 2001, p.74).

One likely reason behind women's chosen or forced silence has been discussed by Deborah Cameron who signifies how social prohibitions and limitations thwart women from speaking:

Even where it seems that women could speak if they chose, the conditions imposed on their lives by society may make this a difficult or dangerous choice. Silence can also mean censoring yourself for fear of being ridiculed, attacked or ignored. (1990, p. 4)

Likewise Zarri Bano is compelled to remain silent as the circumstances enforced onto her life by patriarchal structures make it impossible for her to speak out. After the initial debate with her father she understands her helplessness and weakness, and recognises the insurmountable authority backing her father's decision as Shahzada tells Ruby, "he has his traditions, his father and male relatives to support him" (Shahraz, 2001, p.83). Habib does not stand alone in his decision. As already mentioned, he has his male relatives to support him. His grief of losing his only heir is also collectively shared by his family and his clan. His father and brother both approve of his decision to make Zarri Bano a holy woman thereby saving his inheritance through it. Only after they agree with him and he starts planning the ceremony, is he able to rekindle his energy, "I am the master, the head of the household, the ultimate authority,

which I was born to enjoy" (Shahraz, 2001, p.131).

Shahraz's female characters display what Ghanim describes as the internalisation of masculine superiority - which silences Zarri Bano, her mother, her sister and later her cousin too. For them, to resist is pointless, as their singular voices are effortlessly crushed and dismissed as nothing worthwhile, Cameron writes, "if women's utterance is not forbidden, it is often ignored; and if not ignored, then received with howls of execration. It is the fear of censure which leads to self-censorship" (1990, p. 6).

In her article "The Acrid Candy of Sainthood in *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz" Nazia Hasan is of the view that women throughout the centuries and in various religions have been used in the most versatile and multifaceted ways by their families (2011). Later in the same essay she goes on to assert that all religions and credos somehow have a way of stashing away, disposing and pledging women to religion as extra-members. Examples that she provides include the tradition of devdasis in Hinduism, nuns in Christianity, geishas in Japanese Buddhism, Deuki or Kumari Devi culture in Nepal and finally the Quran brides of Sindh, Pakistan. Out of the

aforementioned, geishas are culturally associated with the artistic and entertaining elements of the Japanese culture and have little to do with religion.

The holy woman's credence has been part of a number of cultures in various places. The devdasi system of ancient India is one such example where these devdasis had a respectable and revered position in society. This practice started centuries ago as a way to honour gods by marrying certain women trained in classical dancing to the deities (Shingal, 2015). The women marrying the deity according to Vinita Govindarajan were highly esteemed and honoured. These devdasis led a celibate life as their only duty was to appease and serve the greater gods (2017). They were sacred and chaste women who lived in the temples. The revered status of a devdasi, however, faded out with the advent of Islam in the Indian sub-continent and then later by British colonisation as patronage to this culture was forcibly stopped. Today this tradition has been banned by law in India and now in the present this devdasi tradition is seen more as a system of institutionalised sexual exploitation and prostitution of young girls mostly belonging to the lower castes and poor economic

backgrounds. The respect and honour associated with the devdasis of ancient India is no more there (N. Hasan, 2011; Shingal, 2015). Another instance of the holy woman canon/doctrine is the Nepalese Deuki or Kumari Devi tradition. It is Nepal's centuries old ritual of a girl child deity known as a Kumari Devi (Tariq, 2017). This pre-pubescent girl child is worshipped and honoured as a source of divine power and fortune but her divinity comes to an end when she reaches puberty and so the position is then taken over by some other young girl. For this prestigious and esteemed position the girls are chosen after a lot of deliberation and weighing of the candidate's physical features and family background (N. Hasan, 2011). The Devi can be as young as three years old.

The tradition of nuns and sisters in Christianity is the most active, evident and glaring indication of the holy woman concept in the world today. Conventionally, nuns are considered the betrothed brides of Jesus Christ (N. Hasan, 2011). A nun's life is characteristic of celibacy, simplicity of lifestyle and devotion. However, in the current age of globalisation, freedom of speech and human rights activism a nun's denouncement of ever marrying

a mortal- her celibacy is considered suppressive by many.

The aforementioned religious usage of women in various religions and cultures provides a much nuanced backdrop to the doctrine of marriage to Quran or Quran bride, *Haq Bakshish* or holy woman or *Shahzadi Ibadat* that is prevalent in Sindh and some parts of South Punjab since centuries.

According to Bedell, *Haq Bakshish* as a custom, “is similar to a Roman Catholic nun’s being married to God and the Church” (2009, p. 56). A Quran bride like a nun leads a life of celibacy and total devotion to religion and to helping others. The major difference between the two being that the nun chooses such a life mostly by her own free will whereas a *Shahzadi Ibadat* is deposited into the religious role mostly by the decision of her male family members. In a similar way Chaudhary compares and contrasts a Christian nun to a Quran bride in his article “A Woman’s Marriage to the Quran: An Anthropological Perspective from Pakistan.” He delineates:

In both cases the virgins commit themselves to a life-long religious service as the alternative to the marital bond. As a difference, the Quran marriage is a family affair, not based

upon the decision of the directly concerned individual (2011, p. 418).

Chaudhary’s aforementioned article is an anthropological study of the tradition of *Haq Bakshish* as practiced in Pakistan. He gives an in depth analysis of the sociocultural aspects associated with this tradition and he is of the view that the Quran marriages cannot be perceived or understood in isolation and need to be viewed within the “domains of law, house-holding, social security, physical security, and religion in its form as “practiced” Islam” (2011, p. 412). His article provides a very different perspective to the tradition under discussion as compared to the resources I hitherto came across. Chaudhary through a detailed discussion asserts that this custom may have economic insinuations but it has not been designed solely based on economic or monetary reasons as landed property mostly remains within the extended family if the marriages take place within that respective family or clan, and even if the girls are married outside of family they normally bequeath their share of the property to their brothers out of familial love. This might be true in some cases as he points out but does not happen in a majority of instances as it has been

seen that property feuds between siblings are common in feudal families. Chaudhary is also of the opinion that a marriage to the Quran is mainly the result of the system of marriage prevalent in the region where two main practices related to marriage are commonly upheld, one being the preference to marry within one's respective clan or *biradari* and the other being hyper-gamy or marrying into either the same or higher financial and social status especially when it comes to daughters and sisters. These practices limit the choices for finding appropriate suitors for women belonging to particular families, tribes or clans such as Syeds and so marriage to the Quran is a respectable alternative available to them. A Quran bride according to him attains a certain kind of respect and esteem among the members of her community and is upheld as a source of piety, holiness and a desire to serve God by such exceptional dedication, "the bride of the Holy Quran and her parents are assumed to have achieved paradise" (Chaudhary, 2011, p. 421). This also is what Habib Khan also considers when he chooses to marry Zarri Bano to the Quran. His decision of making Zarri Bano a *Shahzadi Ibadat* has socio/political repercussions also as he

discerns that this will strengthen his social position (Zaidi, 2012). He is reminded of another *Shahzadi Ibadat* from his childhood and, "how fascinated he had been by that woman and the fame and reverence she had elicited from everyone" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 68). He sees this custom as bringing glory and honour to himself, his daughter and his family. But in contrast to him almost all the women in the novel are shocked at the news of Zarri Bano becoming a holy woman, or a Quran bride. The very piety, fame and honour that Habib Khan associates with the image of a holy woman conveys shock and terror to the female characters who see imposed celibacy and sterility to be a huge sacrifice. Ishaque asserts, "Zarri Bano's identity as a holy woman, when seen as a subject-constitutive reality, brings out a number of facts that feature the complex hermeneutics of religion in relation with identity, space and sexuality of the female" (2017, p. 6). Zarri Bano is attributed the title of holy woman of her clan which presumably is an elevation of her status as she becomes the heiress of her father's land and fortune, but in reality her elevation accounts for her subjugation.

According to Chaudhary the Islamic religious practices have somehow

provided a buffer or a cover for this custom to endure, “at least in “folk Islam” a marriage to the Quran is a religious dedication” (2011, p. 420). This aspect is related to the concept of Sufi Islam or the mystical movement within Islam. This Islamic mystical movement in its initial phase was minimal, and its beliefs did not contest or defy the beliefs of mainstream Muslim culture. Nevertheless, as the number of followers of Sufism increased, the movement’s concepts came more and more into conflict with the instructions of Islamic orthodoxy (Baldick, 2012). One of the chief characteristics of early Sufism was the belief in asceticism or abstinence as the prerequisite to a truly religious life. For that reason, many early Sufis did not get married. The first to openly challenge the institution of marriage was Abu Talib al-Makki in his Sufi treatise *Nourishment of Hearts (Qut al-qulub)* as he felt that marrying incurred a burden as well as a way to distract a person from worship and spirituality (Baldick, 2012). The custom of marriage to the Quran or *Haq Bakshish* can be seen in this context as there is a lot of influence of Sufism in Sindh and South Punjab. Such marriages may be prohibited by formal religion, but yet

they belong to religion in practice (Chaudhary, 2011, p.421).

However, the religious scholars (ulema) and the state institutions in Pakistan reject marriage to the Quran as a religious dedication. Also, “the practice of *Haq Bakshish* is condemned by religious scholars and main stream Muslims” (Bedell, 2009, p. 56). Moreover under Pakistani law, *Haq Bakshish* tradition is punishable by a seven-year prison sentence, but no one dares to report such cases as it is a highly sensitive subject. Such a practice is considered to be a desecration of the Quran as well as sullyng of the institution of marriage under Islam, as Professor Nighat protests with Zarri Bano about the tradition of *Haq Bakshish*, “this is against our Islam. Our Shariah, our courts, both secular and Muslim” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 173). Muslim women have been granted the right to inheritance and to choose a life partner by Islam and no matter whatever be the sociocultural underpinnings the custom of *Haq Bakshish* denies these rights to women therefore it can never be religious in essence. Shahraz herself in an interview points out that the character of:

Zarri Bano, is pivotal to relating the tribal Sindhi custom followed by a

select few – wealthy and very powerful landowners ... the custom has no base in Islam. In fact, throughout my novel I use my characters as a mouthpiece to remind the reader that these practices are against the teachings of Islam (Siddiqui, 2014, p. 221).

The absence of a male heir as well as the desire to retain property within the family make the patriarchs opt for *Haq Bakshish* as a way to preserve the property. Habib Khan validates his decision to marry Zarri Bano to Quran in the following conversation with his wife:

Well, now that I have no son, who is going to be my heir, Shahzada? To whom am I going to bequeath all this land? I am not going to hand it over to some stranger who just happens to marry my daughter. This is our land, accumulated and paid for by the sweat and toil of my forefathers, down the centuries by different generations. Tell me what would you do in my position? (Shahraz, 2001, p. 47)

Where Habib Khan seeks to find refuge from his injustice to his daughter in the tradition of marriage to Quran, Sikander on the other hand highlights how this custom is un-Islamic to its core. He while debating this with his mother asserts:

In Islam there are no nuns, no such things as women married to the Holy Quran! What nonsense is this? No woman is to be denied her natural role as a wife and a mother. Who has invented these traditions? Have they studied the Holy Quran, where it categorically states that widows and divorcees should be encouraged to remarry at the first opportunity? So how can a beautiful young maiden be deliberately denied marriage? (Shahraz, 2001, pp. 119-120)

Sikander's words actually hold a mirror to the custom bound Pakistani society, which follows certain traditions in the name of religion where they are not even based on religion at all (Ishaque, 2017). He puts in contrast the man-made traditions and customs to the tenets of religion, thereby revealing the terrors of the former. The same religion which is used and misused to suppress and subjugate women, in reality gives them a lot of rights in terms of inheritance, choosing of a life partner, gaining of education and so on. The manipulation of religion to tyrannize women is one of the most significant aspects of Pakistani society.

Zarri Bano's life revolves around the custom of *Haq Bakshish* and the repercussions this age-old custom has

on her life and her individuality. The biggest irony that Shahraz wants to draw our attention towards is that this happens to her, she who is a university graduate and an advocate and defender of women's rights (Zaidi, 2012). Shahraz writes:

Zarri Bano had no chance, crushed against this wall of patriarchal tyranny. Even with her youth, feminism, and a university education, and with an outgoing and assertive personality on her side, she was still fated to be the loser in this game of male power-play. (2001, p. 74)

The same is asserted by Professor Nighat who is shocked to hear the news of her becoming a *Shahzadi Ibadat* and comes to see her. The dialogues between the two in this meeting at Zarri Bano's house are significant and emblematic of the whole issue. Professor Nighat is very vocal about her misgivings and about her feeling betrayed by Zarri Bano, one of her most brilliant students. She asserts, "you have betrayed and let down a whole generation of us Pakistani women. If it has happened to a mature university-educated woman – a feminist at that, an extrovert, a modern woman – then Allah help a young, uneducated woman in the backwoods of rural Pakistan (Shahraz,

2001, p. 171). The paradoxical situation is brought out by Professor Nighat as Zarri Bano's nature and personality are in total contrast to her accepting to become a holy woman. To this Zarri Bano gives a long reply by expressing that this whole tradition and its impact on her life has been a rude awakening for her where she has come to realise that her identity and her most important life decisions are to be taken by her father who holds her destiny in his hands. She declares, "... books, feminism, campaigns and education are all utterly useless against the patriarchal tyranny of our feudal landlords" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 171). She feels she is held within a cage, a *pingra* by the men of her family and even if Islam grants women rights to marry according to their wishes, in practice this decision is never theirs to make (Ishaque, 2017). She being an educated woman could have refused to become the holy woman but the trappings of female modesty, sacrificial disposition and emotional and psychological blackmailing on the part of her father break her down. This is also true of many women living in Pakistani society who are subjected to suppression, subjugation and emotional black mailing at the hands of their family members. Zarri Bano

consequently loses all the freedom that she once enjoyed. She feels that the education she got suddenly becomes useless and all what is left behind of her is a powerless, weak and traumatized woman having no control over her life. The same father who provides security and freedom has now transformed into an oppressor making his daughter follow age-old illogical rural customs against her wishes.

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