

Aqsa's last days

Father, teenager had tried to reconcile, friends say

Thursday 20 December 2007, by [ALCOBA Natalie](#), [TREMONTI Anna Maria](#) (Date first published: 15 December 2007).

The night before Aqsa Parvez died, she danced to Indian music under the loving gaze of a Muslim family she had adopted as her own.

The rebellious teenager did not see eye to eye with her parents, so she moved in with a Mississauga family, and last Sunday happily took part in a birthday celebration for the youngest of six Tahir daughters. Everyone complimented Aqsa on her outfit —a pink skirt she had borrowed from one of the sisters, Amal Tahir, and her own matching pink top. “Tell Amal to teach me a couple of steps,” the mother, Lubna, recalled Aqsa asking.

“What I saw in that kid was that she was just asking for acceptance,” Lubna Tahir said. “She wanted to be like a young celebrity. Want to do everything, be in everyone’s eye. Want to be popular. Want to be loved one.”

Police say that the next morning, on a visit back to her family’s Mississauga home to pick up clothes, 16-year-old Aqsa was strangled to death by her father, 57. She will be buried today.

Friends from Aqsa’s high school said the girl had been fighting with her family about her refusal to wear a hijab and other traditional Islamic clothes. They say she “wanted to dress normally,” so she would take off the head scarf at school and make sure to put it back on before she went home.

The suggestion that her death was the tragic end to repeated culture clashes between a traditional Muslim family and their rebellious Westernized daughter has generated a fierce debate.

Canadian Imams have denounced the murder as un-Islamic, but underscored the importance of a hijab by saying that children who shunned it could make some parents feel like failures. Other observers say the discussion should centre around domestic violence, which affects all communities.

Muhammad Parvez, a taxi driver who immigrated from Rawalpindi, Pakistan, prior to his family making the move about seven years ago, remains in jail on a charge of murder. Police said a man called 911 on Monday morning to say he had killed his daughter.

Aqsa died in hospital several hours later. Waqas Parvez, who picked his sister up at a bus stop that morning and took her home, is charged with obstructing police. He was released on \$10,000 bail yesterday.

Mr. Parvez was licensed as a sole taxi operator, which meant he owned his own cab but paid dues to a dispatch brokerage.

He worked for a short period of time for Golden Taxi, before moving to rival Blue & White Taxi. As an independent operator, there was little contact between Mr. Parvez and other cab drivers or dispatch company officials. Several fellow cab drivers and officials at both companies say they know next to nothing about the man or his family.

The Tahirs describe Aqsa as a girl who embraced her faith by praying five times a day, like a good Muslim, while also trying to emulate the “gangsta” style she admired in rap videos. She knew who she wanted to be one day — a famous fashion designer — but struggled, like most teens, to fit in. Aqsa’s three brothers and four older sisters were more reserved than she, which made her sometimes feel misunderstood.

The Tahirs say that days after she moved in with them, Mr. and Ms. Parvez came over, and both families had a two hour meeting with Aqsa.

Her mother cried. Mr. Parvez calmly implored his daughter in Punjabi to tell him why she left and what he could do to bring her home. Aqsa barely spoke, except to say that she “just wanted change,” according to Ms. Tahir. Privately Aqsa told her that she wanted “to get more out of life”.

Mr. Parvez appeared to be relieved that his daughter was safe, said Ms. Tahir, and not alone on the street. He was content to see Aqsa living in a household that resembled his own, said Ms. Tahir, and told her to stay as long as she needed to. Aqsa asked if she could bring items from her house back, and he said they would arrange that “together.”

“That’s how he left,” said Ms. Tahir, an immigration and paralegal consultant who immigrated from Pakistan 10 years ago.

But Aqsa, it seemed, was still searching for independence.

A few days after that first meeting, over coffee in Tim Hortons, Aqsa told her father that she wanted to live on her own, she wanted to go to school in the mornings and work in the evenings. Mr. Parvez offered to let her take over the basement. Aqsa said she would think about it.

“She was satisfied, she was relaxed that somehow her parents understood that this is what she wanted to do, and they didn’t push her to come home,” said Ms. Tahir, who wanted to be an impartial third party to broker peace.

She pressed Aqsa many times to tell her why she had run away. The girl claimed repeatedly that she had never been abused. When one Imam suggested at a press conference this week that boy issues may have been behind Aqsa’s family troubles, the Tahir women, who were in the audience, raised their voices in protest.

Aqsa did not have a boyfriend, said Ms. Tahir, who expressed dismay at the “rumours” in the press, including speculation that it was conflict over wearing the hijab that triggered the alleged murder.

The Tahirs did not know of any dispute over Aqsa wearing a hijab and said that the older Parvez sisters did not always wear the head scarf.

Aqsa’s Applewood Heights Secondary School friends said she started removing her hijab in September, which was also when she ran away from home the first time and to a women’s shelter.

Amal Tahir said Aqsa still periodically wore the hijab, and sometimes other students picked on her.

“They didn’t accept her as easily as they did when she changed her appearance. I told her, if someone doesn’t like you for the way you are inside, the way you dress won’t influence them,” said Amal, who knew Aqsa through her older sister, Irim.

Aqsa sparred with her father about skipping classes, admitted Amal, but she never thought the girl feared Mr. Parvez.

In the two weeks they lived in the same house, Amal and Aqsa bonded — and the older girl learned that Aqsa liked to call the shots.

“She was a dominant personality,” Amal said. She wanted to be the centre of attention, loved posing for pictures, gossiping about boys and experimenting with her appearance. “Typical teen stuff,” Ms. Tahir said.

Privately, Aqsa appeared to be lonely. She was her own best friend, and Amal overheard her talking to herself often. “I talked with her a lot during these two weeks because I completely felt this is my responsibility,” Ms. Tahir said. “And I felt so bad when things had happened this way. I kind of felt guilty, maybe I could have done something different. And then I felt peace. She must be more happy with God, but this is not the way it should be.”

CASES FROM ACROSS THE GLOBE

- Rajinder Singh Atwal stabbed his 17-year-old daughter, Amandeep, 17 times after he discovered she was dating a boy he disapproved of. Atwal was convicted of second-degree murder in British Columbia in March, 2005. He automatically received a life sentence of 25 years in prison.

- A devout Muslim's strict religious beliefs drove him to murder his favourite daughter when he found her “secret” boyfriend in her bedroom, a jury in the U.K. heard in February, 2002, the Manchester Evening News reported. Faqir Mohammed, a father of 10 children, stabbed the 24-year-old student in the head after finding the man when he came home unexpectedly. His original target was the boyfriend, student Bilal Amin, but he escaped by jumping from the bedroom window. The father chased him, but when his daughter tried to stop him, he took hold of her and stabbed her repeatedly, reports stated. “According to the law it was not right, but according to religion it was right,” he told detectives.

- Hina Saleem, 21, was found buried in the backyard of her family's home in Italy. Four men, including her father and uncle, were accused of premeditated murder and hiding the body, lawyer Carlo Bonardi was quoted as saying in an Associated Press story in August, 2006.

Ms. Saleem's mother, Bushra Begun Saleem, told AP her daughter was disobedient — often out late without saying where she was or when she was coming home. She also said she did not forgive her husband for his alleged participation in the killing.

- A Kurdish immigrant in Sweden, who killed his daughter because he did not like her modern way of life, pleaded guilty to the murder in March, 2002. Rahmi Sahindal said he had not planned the killing but lost his temper when he came across his daughter, Fadime, while she was paying a secret visit to her mother and sisters in January. He gunned her down at point-blank range before their eyes. Fadime, 26, had fled the family home to escape from her father and other male relatives who did not want her to mix freely in Swedish society. Sahindal was trying to arrange a marriage for her in Turkey and threatened her when he found out she had been dating a Swedish man.

Natalie Alcoba,

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Aqsa Parvez, A Special Presentation

Anna Maria Tremonti

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On the social networking website, Facebook, there are photo galleries of 16-year-old Aqsa Parvez (registration required to view link). In one picture she wears a long purple dress over leggings. In another a form fitting blue t-shirt. Aqsa lets her bangs hang over her face, she pouts her lips and puts a hand on her hip. And, in every picture, whether she's in a baggy red hoody or tightly cropped jacket, Aqsa wears large, hooped earrings.

I don't know much about Aqsa, but I know she liked fashion; that she wasn't afraid to strike a pose in front of the camera; and, I imagine, that she loved her hoop earrings.

In the flood of outrage since Aqsa's death — the questions about community and the descriptions of a "clash of cultures" — we still know only so much about the murdered Mississauga teen.

Police say a man called 911 at 7:55am on Monday morning to say he had killed his daughter.

Aqsa Parvez died that night at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto.

Her father is charged with second degree murder. Her brother faces obstruction of justice charges.

We took a look at what we know about the life and death of Aqsa Parvez. And with each new piece of information about her friends, the school system and her family's cultural convictions, we'll return to one simple question: what, if anything, could have been done to prevent such a tragedy?

Let's start with what we know.

Aqsa Parvez was a grade 11 student at Applewood Heights Secondary School in Mississauga. According to her friends, she had a 5pm curfew and her parents forced her to wear a hijab to school.

Aqsa Parvez was the youngest of eight children. And, up until last year, an older sister would tell her father if Aqsa misbehaved. But that sister graduated last year, and this past September, friends say Aqsa started taking off her hijab on the bus on the way to school. She would put it back on when she was on her way home. Her friends said every time she let her hair down, Aqsa felt liberated.

Clip: two of Aqsa Parvez's close friends, Dominique Holmes-Thompson and Ashley Garbutt, describing the dual life Aqsa led

This fall Aqsa spent some time at a shelter. Her friends say she was abused at home, and was hit on the arms and face. According to reports, Aqsa returned home after receiving a letter from her family promising she would no longer be forced to wear the hijab. Then, a little more than two weeks ago,

she left home again, and began staying at a friend's house.

Although Aqsa was staying with a friend, on Monday morning, her brother, Waqas Parvez, picked her up at a bus stop where she was waiting to go to school. He told his sister that she should come home to get a change of clothes.

On Tuesday, Aqsa's friends huddled outside their school. They cried and embraced. The school set up a book of condolences on a velvet covered table. Grief councilors were called in.

The Current met up with four of Aqsa Parvez's schoolmates right after they learned that she had died in hospital.

Clip: Scott Irvine, Cody Vattres, Katie Dunks and Jeremy Horvatin at the Square One Shopping Centre in Mississauga

One of Aqsa's classmates pointed his finger at the school, and called on guidance councilors to take a more active role in the personal lives of their students.

To take a look at how much blame can or should be leveled at the school, and the role school councilors play in circumstances like these, The Current contacted Mary-Ellen Lang. She is the Schooling Columnist with cbc.ca and a teacher with more than 30 years of experience.

Clip: Mary-Ellen Lang, teacher and cbc.ca columnist

A spokesperson for the Peel District School Board did say that school staff were aware of conflicts within the Parvez family but that nobody had any inkling the troubles would lead to violence.

According to media reports, Aqsa's friends also knew about conflicts in her family, including suspicions of abuse.

To take a look at what obligation — if any — Aqsa's peer group may have had to report this suspected abuse, we contacted Charlotte Murray, a lawyer who specializes in family law.

Clip: Charlotte Murray, lawyer specializing in family law

Aqsa's friends at school were under no obligation to report any alleged abuse because she was 16, and technically not a child as defined by the child protection legislation.

Many media reports have characterized the conflicts within the Parvez family as a clash of cultures — between a father who wanted his daughter to wear the traditional Muslim hijab and a teenaged daughter who rebelled. That kind of scenario presents a difficult challenge for school councilors because it pits two of their primary goals against each other: ensuring the safety of a student while also being supportive and accepting of the cultures they come from.

Clip: cbc.ca's schooling columnist Mary-Ellen Lang.

If we accept the limitations of the school and its councilors to intervene in culturally sensitive cases, how much of the blame falls on Canada's approach to culture itself? With its 'warm and fuzzy' approach as Mary-Ellen Lang puts it, she's not surprised that lines occasionally get crossed — and a young girl ends up dead.

For Tarek Fatah, the founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress, the timidity around criticizing those cultures liable to cross that line, which ultimately led to Aqsa Parvez's death.

Clip: Tarek Fatah, founder of Muslim Canadian Congress

Following this line of Tarek Fatah's argument, and the risks of young women being forced to wear a head dress, it may be worth taking a closer look at the religious and cultural convictions of Aqsa Parvez's father, Muhammad Parvez, the man accused of killing her. The 57-year-old taxi driver emigrated from Pakistan. In his new home of Mississauga he attended the Islamic Propagation Centre. The IPCI, as it is known, was founded by Ahmed Deedat (note: disputed Wikipedia link), a Muslim scholar whose rhetoric has been criticized as fundamentalist.

There are plenty of examples of Ahmed Dadeet's speeches online.

Clip: Ahmed Dadeet talking about why women should wear a hijab.

It is impossible to speculate what, if any, of Ahmed Deedat's teachings influenced Aqsa Parvez's father. And, in many ways, Deedat's speeches appear innocuous on the surface. His tone is light, even as he suggests that young women who do not wear a hijab may be inviting trouble.

But for Tarek Fatah, the hijab is an important symbol, one that can represent a choice and a faith — but, under other circumstances, can also represent oppression. And the inability to identify instances where religious convictions are thrust upon the most vulnerable members of minority communities in Canada, leaves people like Aqsa Parvez vulnerable.

Clip: Tarek Fatah, founder of Muslim Canadian Congress

Faith has many meanings. On one hand it's a conviction that something is true or real - such as faith in a just and loving God. But faith can also represent an obligation of fidelity to those very same convictions.

Obligations which, under a radical form of Islam, require those who transgress that faith to be severely punished. Some have called it honor killings.

But can we really blame radical Islam on what happened to Aqsa Parvez?

Surely Canadian society as a whole should play a role in reigning in what Tarek Fatah has described as 'medieval practices' of retribution.

And, as Raminder Dosanjh is quick to remind us, the sort of oppression Aqsa Parvez may have faced is common in other communities in Canada. Dosanjh is a founding member of the India Mahila Association, a volunteer organization for South Asian women.

Clip: Raminder Dosanjh discussing status of women

Here are three cases in Canada where violent circumstances have resembled what some people might call "honour killings".

In March, 1991, a man gunned down three people in Calgary with an AK-47. Daljit Singh Dulay was found guilty of two counts of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison. The court heard that he had hired a private investigator to track down his sister and her boyfriend as the relationship went against the family's wishes. He walked up to a car and fired almost 30 bullets into the young couple.

In June 2000, 25-year-old Jaswinder Kaur Sindhu was found beaten and stabbed to death. Police charged her mother with ordering her death to restore the family's honour. Jassi, as she was known,

married a man from her mother's village with the same family name, which is said to be the same as marrying a family member. Her uncle was quoted as saying, "In our culture, this is not acceptable. But we did not kill her."

In July 2003, Rajinder Singh Atwal took the lifeless body of his 17-year-old daughter to a hospital. She had 11 stab wounds. He claimed Amadeep had committed suicide. Prosecutors said Atwal had killed his daughter in a fit of rage because she refused to end a relationship with her white boyfriend. A jury found Rajinder Singh Atwal guilty of second degree murder.

These murders took place not within Canada's Muslim community but within the Indo-Canadian community. By pegging culturally-specific motivations to a murder, society as a whole may run the risk of absolving itself of responsibility.

Uzma Shakir is the Executive Director of the South Asian Legal Clinic. The way she sees it. Aqsa's death is less about religion and more about systemic imbalances that cross all cultural divides.

Clip: Uzma Shakir discussing cultural imbalances

Aqsa Parvez's father has been charged with second-degree murder. According to the law, this means the murder was not premeditated. We are left simply with case of a 16-year-old girl, and a 57-year-old man accused of killing her.

Beyond the schoolmates, the councilors, the religion, the clash of cultures — as a society we all must face the grim prospect that here in Canada, in Mississauga, on December 10th, shortly before 8am, a father allegedly killed his daughter.