

Avatar

A Polemic

by

Sadia Mubarak

The simulation was the name of the game, it was corporations imitating art destroying art imitating life such dreadful forlorn lives of the women in this country my God. Men played bosses, men played The Bosses in penguin suits, men the males the people blessed with XY-chromosomes and heterosexual identities and Sunni castes patted each other on the back, took cigarette and vape and Allah-knows-what-other-substance breaks, held meetings in places the *females* must not know about oh they just mustn't. Deals on the table accepted and passed without the fe- of the males catching wind of them. A web of bro-hood that connected *dudebros*, a web you couldn't see without being a part of, a web that chafed and pricked at those oblivious of its existence.

I dodged and ducked this web by pure instinct, without seeing, without hearing, except when the light caught it just right, the filter cracked, equality slipped and I think I *saw* but no, I had been too tired that day. Hormonal, delusional, angry. I travailed, my avatar travailed, this person I crafted with such painstaking detail, trying to get every feature just right just right not too much. Did it look attractive? The most beautiful I could have crafted with these hands my own hands. Did it look like me? I don't know I don't know was it supposed to? Was it supposed to do that?

The males – I saw them – designing an avatar for both genders but they couldn't go through the trouble of designing a moving dude *and* a girl so they stuck with the one that everyone would be happy with. Correction: they could not afford offending their young men – the men born into spaces that did not restrict their movements; the males the gender that didn't need to strain their eyes to see themselves represented as anything other than pieces of meat; the gender stranger to a self-actualizing representation will not feel the absence of it. They hoped the avatar's privilege would rub off on me, or maybe they hoped I learned my place before coming in.

It was my story your story her story, a saga that wrote itself in invisible ink, a tale of the hyper-aware glances while walking on the road, the wary looks thrown at men because anyone of them could be *the* man, no, not *The One* or *The Prince*, but *the man* who made you a part of the saga, of the horror stories told to young girls before they look like women, all across this homeland of ours, this country whose *map* was etched out like the silhouette of a lamb ready for slaughter except the lamb was the woman always the woman.

The lamb was Malala, better known as American agent, foreign spy in this lamb shaped country of ours and a hero, a paragon of courage and grace and humility everywhere else. Now it was Mahira with her backless dress and cigarette breaks that threatened the honor of the nation with a green and white flag, and made adherents of a religion that meant peace call out 'bloody murder'. Here a brother slaughtered the lamb in the literal sense because a sister pulled herself out of poverty with the only weapon she had – her womanhood – that double-edged sword that our mothers warned us about, wield it not, for you are as likely to maim yourself on it as to scare, terrorize another. But always, the first probability more, always the first one.

I learned that the dual nature of women's sexuality was not to be equated with the toss of a coin. The coin was unbiased – the society, not so much.

The men of this country who – because how can you have a conversation about women in this country without men? Women without men? Unheard of. Our benefactors, our counterparts, our equals but not like that, with higher sexual drives and allowed four wives and whose pleasures we can't say no to and who think marital rape is not something, is nothing, is one of those things those westerners, those wayward westerners so uncivilized and uncouth have come up with. Not us, we do not believe in such *fahashi*.

Men in my country expect greater righteousness and religious observance from women in the media than they do from the men giving the religious sermons (those who preach about abstinence while sporting potbellies).

These men, men of our country, and you see I was supposed to be talking about women but I can't, I cannot find the words, the narrative I have seen and lived and breathed does not make protagonists out of the women. They are nurturers, girlfriends, sisters, wives – kindnesses to be received, accessories to male desire, honors to be protected and caged and made jokes out of, but never, never the sun that the solar system revolves around, never that central point of gravity that moves the earth the moon the stars of the whole narrative the whole galaxy with it. It would take a more courageous, irreverent, self-possessed woman than I can ever hope to be to construct a narrative with no giants on whose shoulders she can stand upon. It would take a giantess in creativity and fortitude and I do not believe that she is not born yet. I think she is here, among us, reflections of her are in the thousands in the

numbers and scores of women who are biding their time, waiting waiting waiting in the face of terrible oppression with determined chins and unconquerable souls waiting for that inevitable moment when the wheel turns and they rise up up up.

Mine would be a gloomy perspective in the worst of times, but to ladle this on to people while the exchange rate falls, journalists are laid off and people tighten their belts and are given the same advice by their nutritionists and political leaders alike, I cannot be content with myself if I contribute to the atmosphere of desolation and hopelessness and destitution.

In any case, there are also many women who break glass ceilings, there is 19-year-old who does not let patriarchy or classism or people's delicate sensibilities get in the way of her mobility, she will reach her destination come rain or shine, air-conditioned car or no. There are women who opt out of the oppressive system by refusing to marry and carry on their lives financially independent, free of any men breathing down her neck. There are writers, activists, women who don't take no for an answer, girls who harness the power of social media and form collectives, use it to get their message out there, help their sisters stay woke.

These individual efforts are remarkable, praiseworthy, *essential* as a catalyst for more women ministers in the cabinet, more diversity, a representative that fights for us in fights that happen behind closed doors, the fights we don't know about, we need a warrior woman who will fight these invisible battles for us, we need *her* as we need *you*.