

Is this Pakistan?  
or,  
Womanhood in Images

*An Essay*

by

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2019. In the early hours of the tenth of Ramadan, a man shoots his daughter for not waking him up for *sehri*. She bleeds all over the floor, I imagine, blood staining earth red, viscous, like the Rooh Afza syrup stores stock for *iftar* feasts all over the country. A few hours prior, about five hundred kilometres away, a twenty-two-year-old woman steps out for *sehri* with a friend. Before long, three police constables have kidnapped and raped her. The next morning is heavy with whispered questions about why she was out so late and the country devolves into debates about womanhood, virtue and consent.

*Is this Pakistan?*

It is late 2018 and Punjab Health Minister Dr. Yasmin Rashid advocates banning the disclosure of the gender of unborn babies in an attempt to curb abortions of female foetuses, as many policymakers in Pakistan and India have done before her. In this part of the world, the discarded bodies of female foetuses and babies would fill graveyards, if they got burials. Most are only buried under piles of trash, tucked to sleep under discarded plastic bags and putrid banana peels, all steaming under the glare of an unforgiving sun. Some unwanted babies are spared. The *lucky* ones find themselves birthed and then promptly deposited in Edhi Foundation cradles.

*Is this Pakistan?*

Somewhere, a baby girl is born. Her relatives peer over her crib. Her skin is thankfully fair. They breathe a sigh of relief because it means she will find a *match*. They start planning for her dowry. She has just opened her eyes to the world and, already, the spectre of a husband hangs over her. *Sayah-e-Khuda-e-zul-jalal or sayah-al-zawj*? The distinction is lost. Before she is eighteen, she will have heard that her life lacks permanence many times over. *Iss ne tau apne ghar jaana hai. Allah iss ka naseeb acha karay*. She might stop and wait for her life to begin, convinced that she will only live in the after, when she is someone's wife. She might think that everything that comes before must not matter, *cannot* matter. She might even dream about her wedding day and vacillate between thinking of it as the best day of her life and the only one that matters. She might concentrate on the day and not the after: The glittering gowns, the burst of colours, the beating of drums, the showers of red rose petals, the enduring fragrance of petals crushed in fists. The heavy, beaded lehngas that demand stillness from their wearers, the burden of false lashes glued onto real lashes, the staring, the questions and the blinding

lights. And then, after: The new home. The only home. The not-quite-your-home. The ID card with her identity yet again tied to a man but now a new sort of man, a husband. Her identity forever an extension of his.

*Is this Pakistan?*

It's 2011. A drama premieres on Hum TV and takes the country by storm. Its star, Fawad Khan, once the lead singer of alternative noughties band E.P., is skyrocketed to heartthrob status with his role as Ashar. It seems everyone is dreaming about finding their *Ashar*. Yet, it only takes a few episodes to establish that while Khan does his utmost to turn the smoulder into an art form, the character himself is surly, moody and defensive. He's certainly not dream-worthy. This, he cements when he sits idly by as his family is split asunder and his long-suffering pregnant wife, Khirad, tossed out of his family home. Time passes, seasons change and in the final episodes, Ashar sheds a few tears and metes out some apologies. This is more than enough. The series finale finds him back in the role of good guy. Ashar, Khirad and their daughter dance in the rain to the sound of music and a saccharine voiceover.

*Curtains. Applause.* It's neat. A happy ending. A happy family.

*Is this Pakistan? I wonder. How can it be?*

In October of that year, Archbishop Desmond Tutu nominates a fourteen-year-old girl from Swat for the International Children's Peace Prize for her work promoting girls' education. All the major newspapers report this and the country cheers her on. The girl appears on television, a cotton dupatta loosely draped around her face. She is still a palatable model of empowerment. When she speaks, she looks the reporter straight in the eye and shares her plans for the future, they are teeming with ambition and optimism, something that is both remarkable for, and characteristic of, her youth. By December, the Prime Minister has given her the National Peace Award for Youth. Reporters from all the main television channels sing her praises.

Two years later, Malala Yousafzai is shot on a school bus. The country is flooded with images of the girl on life support, being airlifted to the UK, lying on a hospital bed, head wrapped in layers of gauze. When she recovers, she speaks with the same surety but half of her face is frozen in time. Soon she's becoming an international figure and walking across a stage in

Oslo to receive her Nobel Prize. Now, the country cries “Agent!” and the same television channel that praised her two years ago runs a segment entitled “The Reality of Malala.”

*Is this Pakistan?*

I avoid walking down the street now. I’m twelve. They leer. I wrap myself in giant lawn chadors that engulf me from top to bottom whenever I have to step out. Beady eyes still follow me, motorcycles stop in the street and drivers turn their heads back one-eighty degrees. I soon learn that all that matters is the suggestion that I am a girl, the promise that I am to become a woman; the rest, imagination can fill in. They’re jackals.

It is the beginning of the social media age. I see images going around. One sticks. In it, an unwrapped lollipop stands against a garish yellow background, it glistens an outrageous, lacquered red as flies crawl on its smooth surface, huge, black, abundant. Next to it is a wrapped lollipop, demure, free of the swarm of flies. “Hijab” it simply says in bold letters above. I know, already, this is not how it works.

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2007. It’s two days after Christmas and Quaid-e-Azam Day, and the sky is on fire. On the ground are tattered bits of tricolored red, black and green party flags and posters bearing Benazir Bhutto’s smiling face. White dupatta, white teeth, haunting now. Underneath, are the bodies of a number of party workers, layers of dust and grime and asphalt, limbs sticking out, grotesque, bent at unnatural angles. As aides swarm and sirens ring out, Benazir Bhutto is sprawled on a gurney and it is almost as if her iconic dupatta has been transformed into the white sheet that covers her body. A bloodstained car seat is behind her and the smell of burning tires, hot on the air. A million candles are lit and wreathes of red roses lain. *Who killed Benazir Bhutto?* The question begins in investigation, meanders into conspiracy theory and crystallizes into myth.

1988. Benazir Bhutto is elected Prime Minister. She is just thirty-five, and the first woman to lead a Muslim country. The world is flooded with magazine covers about progress. She makes a fine symbol: Heir to a political dynasty, progressive, a Harvard-educated Oxford Union President. She smiles a demure smile on a cover here and there, dupatta fixed on top of her head as if held up by sheer force of will. *Red lipstick, white dupatta.* It becomes her iconic

look, a battle armour fit for Alexander Pope's sylphs. On one cover, the Prime Minister poses with her young son, her spitting image, and for a moment, the photo contains a promise that Pakistani women could maybe have it all.

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The history of great men is long, it is spread across chapters in Pakistan Studies books, it covers entire portrait walls at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but the history of women is a more closely guarded secret, held close to the chest, contained within four walls, whispered across generations. The resilience of women is extolled; patience, revered; endless capacity to give, to "compromise", worshipped. The domestic is the political; the political, the domestic, and the pain is visceral, a sentient thing, a live wound on the soul of every woman, ripped open every morning when the papers report a rape, an acid attack and a murder. At times, it feels the country is built on the bodies of women, all around us, underneath us, always. They say heaven is under a mother's feet but how many mothers are under our feet? How many lives do we trample every day or bury, unfulfilled?

And yet.

In 1972, when a military regime arrests a left-wing politician, his eighteen-year daughter pursues a case against the government in the Supreme Court. In a landmark decision, the court eventually finds in favor of her petition and derides the military ruler as an "usurper". Asma Jahangir goes on to train as a lawyer herself and, in 1978, establishes Pakistan's first all-female legal firm with her sister, Hina Jilani, and two friends. They set about defending women seeking to escape abusive marriages, bonded labourers trying to secure freedom and religious minorities fighting for their lives after false blasphemy accusations. In 1987, Jahangir co-founds the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

When in 2002, Mukhtara Mai refuses to be silenced after being subjected to a gang rape by order of a tribal council, Asma Jahangir is there to rally for her case. Mai emerges from her ordeal an activist and a global hero, the hardest steel forged in a terrible fire. When they meet, Jahangir tells her, "Pakistan needs more women like you. You are very brave." She continues, "Don't be silent. We cannot be silent." That day Mai decides to set up a women's shelter in her hometown.

### *Is this Pakistan?*

As Pakistan is only just emerging out of the remains of British India, a Muslim woman trains to be a journalist and receives a scholarship to continue her studies in the United States. Marriage, family and the chaos of Partition all interfere and she is unable to pursue a career in journalism. In 1993, her daughter, a London School of Economics-trained political scientist becomes the first woman to assume the post of Pakistan's Ambassador to the US. The following year, *TIME* magazine names her one of hundred people around the globe expected to shape the twenty-first century. She is the only Pakistani to make the list. In 2015, Maleeha Lodhi shatters another glass ceiling when she becomes the first woman to serve as Pakistan's Ambassador to the United Nations. By then, she already has a glittering career behind her, has amassed many more accolades, authored some books and received the Hilal-e-Imtiaz for Public Service.

### *Is this what Pakistan was meant to be?*

1944. It is a few years before Pakistan will come into existence. Its would-be founder Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah makes a speech. He says,

“No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you. We are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live.”

Years later, the first sentence will be emblazoned on banners that will be pulled out of storage and dusted off every International Women's Day. It will be copied onto ad campaigns and become corporate lip service. The rest will be forgotten and the “deplorable condition” defended as “our culture” in living rooms, on television programs, in the National Assembly.

1940. A group of girls smile at a camera. They are dressed in a uniform of gleaming white shalwar kameez and dupattas that are tied across their chest like sashes on beauty queens. Quaid-e-Azam sits in the middle, starched, trademark sherwani; white hair, slicked back. The girls in the photo are the Muslim League's National Women's Guard. Already, they are making strides into a bright new future in the footsteps of those who have come before them, Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz, Miss Fatima Jinnah, Begum Raana Liaquat Ali Khan, and

Lady Haroon. Change is just within grasp. They are standing on the edge of a better tomorrow. Their faces are bright with the hopes they hold for the years ahead, for their own futures, the future of their Muslim League, and the future of women.

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