

Growing as a Pakistani Woman: A Journey of Emotions

An essay

by

Nabeeha Chaudhary

Anger

Amongst the earliest memories of my childhood in Lahore is my unrestrained excitement the morning my sister was born and my journey through the neighborhood market searching for a present to greet her with. During my mother's pregnancy, multiple relatives and outsiders encouraged six year old me to pray for a brother. They never stopped to think that maybe I really wanted a sister, because who in their right mind would pray for a girl? Personally, I had been thrilled about potentially having a younger sister. I remember being briefly indignant, as to why I was being told what I should want, and then going on to do what I wanted to anyway—pray for a sister. Even as a six year old I remember thinking how sad people's mentality was. However, it was easier to set such thoughts aside and to move on at that young age.

It becomes harder and harder to keep such thoughts away as life progresses though. You get enmeshed in a nightmarish web of daily punishment meted out to you because you are a woman. Double confinement and punishment if you dare to even slightly go against the standard notions of what a woman should be and how she should act. Every aspect of life somehow becomes a battle with society—school, work, love, companionship, marriage, or simply even the ability and right to choose right from wrong on the basis of your own judgment, because what would you know? You're just a child, then just a wife or a bitter spinster, and then a voice lost in the crowd. You are not allowed the freedom to be able to point out to others if they have wronged you or wronged others. If you dare to do so, be ready for some form of punishment, some kind of ostracization, some kind of battle.

If vocabulary to call out harassment, oppression, or sexism has become more common, those who refuse to even try and understand the problem have also collected new vocabulary to use against anyone and anything that attempts to point out that there may be some flaws in the way we insist on living life in certain spheres. As Sarah Banet-Weiser has stressed, the rise of popular feminism has also facilitated a rise of popular misogyny.¹ When you point out, that doing things a certain way just because that is how we have always done them is not a good enough reason to keep on facilitating injustice, they say you are inept, crazy, or shameless. It seems as if it is easier for them to brush it off as the ravings of a misguided "feminist type" or kuch ziada hee parhi likhi hui larki (overeducated woman). I have heard of women proclaiming

that girls who get PhD' are too educated to be acceptable wives and no Pakistani man will want to marry them, so they had better look for a Westerner. I have seen educated, working women refusing to bring home daughters-in-law who are highly educated and/or working women. I have seen the kindest of women turn suspicious when they encounter a potentially “modern” girl — whatever that may mean.

As you grow, you begin to understand how deep the toxicity goes and how complex patriarchy is. There are no simple solutions and there is no ease of being able to extract one cause from others from within an entangled web of cause and effect. In short, the more you know, the less you know. You begin to see how so many women end up being the biggest perpetrators of patriarchy, many of them victims and oppressors simultaneously. In a Pakistani context especially you see this situation so perfectly exemplified in the stereotypical desi saas-bahu relationships. Relationships which have become a source of comic material in social conversations or easy fodder for television drama after drama where stories of inappropriate behavior and toxicity are repeated so often that they have become normalized —“Aisay hee hota hai.”

In the same stories and serials, even well-meaning social messaging can become problematic when it follows unhealthy patterns. When majboor women going out to earn are lauded as heroes and those choosing to work, without the financial need for it, are repeatedly categorized as villains, we have a problem. When romantic love and marriage become the central theme of every other story of a woman's life (complete with typical wedding visuals of course), we have a problem. When sympathy for a domestic abuse survivor has to be validated by how her abuser killed her unborn baby — her value as a mother still overshadowing her value as a human being — we have a very big problem.

In general, the unhealthy exaltation of motherhood in Pakistan both invalidates a woman's purpose as anything else and hands unjustified power in the hands of many mothers who abuse it. Abuse it to the extent that it even becomes hard to follow or understand. The emotional abuse, the manipulation, the controlling, the repeated over stepping of boundaries. The slow and constant wearing down of another human being's energy, self-esteem, motivation and

happiness. They do it in the form of mothers-in-law where many cannot bear sharing their sons' love and attention, a phenomenon which is shrugged off as a "natural reaction" and not really investigated as possibly being a social and cultural construct. They do it in the form of mothers where they put their children in impossible positions all the while claiming it is for their child's own good. They do it knowing that the society they live in has spent all its time and energy instilling enough unnecessary fear, guilt, and an (often unfair) sense of responsibility in their children. A society that has twisted religion's emphasis on being good to parents and replaced it with letting your parents rule over you as if they own you. They often see their sons as investments and cash cows, they often see their daughters as burdens to be disposed off. Forget about retirement plans—the purpose of a son is to look after them when they grow old and by "look after" is meant to dance to their every whim, to bow to their every command, even if it means denying himself or his own family respect, happiness, or basic human rights. After all, the mother is the ultimate deity to put on an altar, to worship, to sacrifice others to, to sacrifice self to. That is how womanhood is exalted in one arena, allowing it to be crushed even more in other spaces.

Guilt

My anger at how things were in society often used to overtake my ability to untangle cause, effect, and solutions in constructive ways. Stepping out of the familiar and going abroad did help put things in perspective in some ways. There were new battles to be fought—battles of balance; of being able to point out to a global audience that the Pakistani woman was much more than a victim while still addressing the problems she had to face. On top of everything else, as a Pakistani woman studying and working abroad, there is an internal pressure to not just highlight the negatives inherent in society back home. At the same time there is an external pressure to turn a blind eye to critical problems that are very real and need to be addressed. At times, you will be bashed back home for being a hater, for being too sucked into a "Western" mode of thought.

I am extremely proud of the fact that I am a Pakistani woman. My identity is inextricably linked to this aspect of my existence and I am very glad that it is. However, that does not mean that I am required to agree with all the cultural and social norms in the country. People get

offended when someone tries to oppose certain deep rooted practices, or modes of thought, prevalent in their society. They call you disloyal when you highlight the flaws instead of covering them up or justifying them. That is not justified at all. I believe we are almost never as passionate in the criticism we level against things we dislike, as we are in criticizing what we love most. It's called constructive criticism; a desperate desire to see something live up to its full potential by doing away with negative characteristics that others can point fingers at. While the experience of being a woman in Pakistan infuriates and frustrates me at times, I still love being someone whose roots are firmly grasping my native soil as I branch out into newer territories.

Hope

It is not all gloom and doom. There is a unique beauty of womanhood to be celebrated in Pakistan. There are the women who get up and fight every single day, the women who do not lose hope even in the face of extenuating circumstances, women who do not become bitter, women who are able to be an inspiration to others. These amazing women who even in the midst of disastrous situations are able to laugh, to hold each other up, and to spread joy, whether as sisters, friends, mothers, daughters, mothers-in-laws, daughters-in-law, colleagues, teachers, or even strangers on the street. For every four women that will raise fingers at you, there will be a woman whose support and cheering on will outweigh the ugliness of the other five, even if she is a stranger.

I remember being on transatlantic plane rides striking up conversations with random Pakistani aunties who I would never see again but who helped make my journey easier. I remember girls who stood and waited with me during college, office, and social outings to ensure I got home safe. I remember random women passing me a compliment on the steps of the beauty parlor, at the fruit vendor's, at a literary event—compliments that sometimes made a bad day so much better. I remember the woman walking outside my wedding venue, as I stood outside, who gave me the biggest twinkling smile and said “Baji zabardast lag rahi ho.” I felt an immense sense of gratitude and an indescribable bond with this woman of my soil who spoke my language and cheered me on. I remember incredible women who as teachers and mentors became the backbone of my identity today. Women who taught me to speak up, to take on challenges, to always consider other perspectives, and to have faith in myself. I would be nothing

without these women.

I hope there comes a day when we are able to celebrate being women in and from Pakistan without fear, without suspicion towards each other, and without hostility. Most importantly, I hope we are able to overcome the deeply entrenched structural, social, and institutional barriers that enable and sustain the toxic aspects of our being. One day, I hope to bypass guilt and frustration to arrive at an invigorating calm which allows me to fully be and embrace the Pakistani woman I am, without having to offer explanations and justifications for existing the way I am.