

Barh Mein Jayein Loug

(People Can Just Go to Hell)

A memoir

by

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Every day, I am reminded of how good I have it, and I don't entirely disagree. The fact that my father moved all the way from Abbaspur, Kashmir, to Karachi, the fact that he went from selling concert tickets and roadside corn to a white-collar job in a multinational company, the fact that both my parents are university graduates when their own parents are mostly illiterate: those are small miracles that have changed the landscape of our lives. We were, and are, examples of class mobility when all the odds were stacked against us. Again, I don't entirely disagree that that was a good thing.

The bound continues from their generation to mine, expanding in reach. I grow to become the first child in my family to go to private school, then private college (co-ed to boot), then to private university. I do my parents proud (let's not entirely agree here), racing through milestones until I can run across water over them, the most ordinary sort of chosen. The list grows: the first child to do O/A Levels, the first daughter to be allowed to have a temper, a voice, the first to leave home to study, and thus, the first to go to LUMS. Balance is a tricky thing, especially when you aren't allowed to start over; I am aware of all the eyes on me, the parents critical and the daughters – my cousins – desperate, eager, hopeful. Everyday, I am told that my surliness and disrespect of tradition is noted by my elders, who not only admonish my parents for encouraging it but also weaponize it against their own children. They vow to never let them know as much freedom as I have so they don't start questioning what they have been told, the blind obedience that has been beaten into them. In my family, balance is lost like izzat is. You can't get it back.

We stack my achievements on top of each other to build a tower, but everyone knows what comes next when a story has one of those and a woman too in it. The trope is more tired than a laborer, than my mother with my rule-breaking. We lay the foundation with all the misery that can't be acknowledged: the sexual abuse I suffered at the hands of a family member (the same family waiting for my failure with front-row tickets), having to live paycheck to paycheck every month because we wanted more success than our (lack of) generational wealth allowed, my lying so I can have the same mobility and freedom my friends do. I am allowed only the respectable human rights, the honorable ones that bring success – not humanity, not mistakes, not ugly joy in the streets. To love a daughter in Pakistan is shown by beautifying her, by wanting her to become the most desirable version of herself, all of it respectable and religiously ordained. You want your daughter to be worth something, and your upbringing leads you to believe that marriage is the only indicator of value. But she can't be worth marrying if she talks like that, if she has no room

in her head for quiet noble suffering because it's filled with ridiculous notions like autonomy and choice and self-prioritization. Self-aware is the ugliest a daughter can be, and for that, I am Medusa, petrifying everyone around me because I have no shame about looking them in the eye. My reflection is found on foreign shores and in their foreign myths; all the demons in my land look at the ground when they roam, covering their faces with hair or a dupatta. Even in the terror they inflict, they're more respectable than I am.

The lock on the tower-gate is my age, a ticking time-bomb in my face. My mother is fighting a race against time itself, working round the clock to ensure I'm wedded off at my most fertile, my prettiest, my most vulnerable. She's being pragmatic the way only a lower-middle-class woman can be, aware that men look for mindless trophies to bend to their wills. The most she can hope to get out of it for both of us is that I never have to work a day in my life. I marry into a rich family and need to only be oppressed by them, instead of having to set out to work a grueling shift in this patriarchal society and end up abused in both spheres. Again, I don't entirely disagree. Like all women in Pakistan, we make choices on the basis of what will hurt the least and leave us to survive another day. There's no absolute happiness, no safety. The only totality we know is the reach of misogyny, pervading every realm.

A good bride is Kashmiri only by name, because it implies she's a fertile baby-making machine who will pop out many beautiful children, each as white as mountain snow. A good bride is open to exoticization and fetishism, where her Kashmiri-ness is an accessory that makes her desirable because she is rare. Tell Pakistani men you're Kashmiri and you can see their eyes light up, as eager to conquer and occupy as their state is. They hear of a location they associate with rurality and they think purity, ease of control, a strangeness that can be sexualized without being threatened. Pakhtun women suffer the same unique form of violence, where they are dehumanized not just for being Pakhtun (angry, savage, all stereotypes associated with tribal backgrounds), but for being Pakhtun women, coveted to emasculate Pakhtun men. It is difficult to explain to urban women this phenomenon, because they too believe rural women must be saved, like the white women they condemn behave towards them. Irony dies a million deaths in Pakistan and rises like the same pagan gods they detest, with as many avatars.

And I know what people will say. This is meant to be a memoir, not a sociological essay, but those people are probably blind to the political and social structures around them, and that is no

fault of mine. When I identify the source of my misery, I do it to dismantle it. I am aware I do not exist in a vacuum, and neither do my circumstances. When womanhood in Pakistan is identified primarily by how it holds the collective together, how marriage create alliances between families and the woman is the bridge between them, how sectors of care are all staffed by exploited women, it would be downright stupid to ignore how so much of my role is a demand to maintain that same collective. So that's what I'm (not) doing. I must speak of the collective to speak of myself.

But the collective also wants me to talk about anything but myself, because a woman's own concrete self must not exist. There should only be a vague spineless lump that can be kneaded to fill out the role she must perform. The collective says this is all for my own good. Music is not for good women; payals are not for respectable women; dance is not for chaste women. Pakistani womanhood is defined entirely by what it isn't, what you can't have, what you're not allowed and how much you must serve others. Ask what's in it for you and only you and there will be no answer. The first person to ever ask me how I felt and what I wanted was a therapist, and even she had to try five times because I was so unaccustomed to that question that I kept answering it the wrong way.

Dreams are a privilege you must sacrifice everything else for. No one ever tells that to be woman means to be less than human, because humans are allowed frivolity, shallowness, silly fancies. A woman must be ten times more scattered than this memoir, to bend gracefully whenever pushed in a direction. She exists only to be what is asked of her: the martyr, the Madonna, the saint, an obsessive mother because she'll be blamed if her children are shameful, the sister who marries well and helps her brothers marry up as well. Poetry fills her kachha dimagh with Western nonsense, such as love that she chooses and in turn, chooses her, like the possibility of not having to slot herself into a Paro-Chandramukhi binary with suffering on both ends, love that lets her be her own person and isn't just turned against her as an excuse that the hand raised against her is simply out of 'passion'. Literature is only to be pursued as an obligatory undergrad degree to show that she's educated because other subjects discuss theoretical frameworks that might expose for subjugation to her, not actually loved and wanted as a career. The only joy she should know is in churning out children, sons as abusive as their fathers and daughters as helpless as their mothers and as in denial about it.

But there could be worse things, I am reminded. I could be shown this world and yanked out of it. Or, we could take it a step further: I could have been raised without knowing any of this. My family reminds me that if they brought me to this height, they will not think twice about pushing me off it. It is a privilege to be allowed to be this smart, this articulate. To ask to be ugly, reckless, happy in my mistakes, would be treason. My rebellion would incite others to engage in that overthrow too, because again, a woman is not her own person. She exists to enforce a collective. This was not a right; this was a barter and I must give back by making my family proud, by marrying up, by showing that it's possible to be both aware of your oppression and at peace with it. Think of what your cousins will be denied if you fail. Think of how heavily your siblings will be policed because your parents will realize what not to give to the other children, or they will stray off the beaten path too.

But there are collectives of other traumatized women that I have been chosen to be a part of, who understand the stakes because they live them. The least I wanted was to not be alone in the dark, and I'm not. I have many small clusters of families dotting the country, all of us struggling to get out of a bind that keeps whispering it loves us, all of us slowly understanding we can't make everyone happy and keep ourselves safe too. We try to break free for everyone after us, for those we haven't met yet, but our lives are bringing us towards to serve as examples of everything that could be theirs if they too found the way out that we lit up for them.

In an hour, the third anniversary of Qandeel Baloch's death will end, the most vivid example of what family will do to you in recent memory. It will mark the start of another year of more news stories where daughters are killed by their parents or their brothers, serving as proof that being a woman and being a person are mutually exclusive in Pakistan. It will be another year of ignoring the role of class in womanhood, of how few of us make it out alive. Everything a woman does to assert herself is an attack that emasculates men. My life is not mine because everything I do is relational, defining everyone else around me. Maybe someday, I'll be free to only think of myself when I act. Maybe someday, I can choose whom I get to impact.

In the film *What Will People Say*, the father lets his daughter run away to be her own person. He is realistic enough to recognize she will never be accepted here, even if he stands up for her, but at least he can free her. At least he can pretend to forget to lock the tower door and let her fly away in the dead of the night, so she can look for other homes. How does your heart not break to

hear the caged bird that sings? How do you love it and not want to hear it sing with joy instead of misery?

What's the point of beauty rising out of sacrifice when it consumes everything you love? The tower does not protect her. It makes your daughter want to jump off the roof instead. If she's destined for hell, either by her death or by her life, rest assured she will take with her everyone who forced her into it. If the people won't go to hell, she'll bring it to them, still a Prometheus because she brings light to those in the dark.