**Red Right Hand**

B Y Z A R R A R K H U H R O 2021-03-15

THERE`S something about sitting safely behind a keyboard that brings out the worst in too many of us. And there`s something in our nature that inclines us to believe the worst about those whom we dislike, to rail and rant against them, to seize any and every opportunity to degrade, abuse and incite. And it feels so good; it`s so cathartic to be able to take that impotent anger and misdirected rage and just let it vomit forth without a care for the consequences. Because in that brief moment of release you can forget about your woes and be a part of a glorious, righteous whole.

Combine all this and you have what we saw on social media after the Aurat March: an outpouring of malice, hate and lies all wrapped up in one tumorous package. For the few of you who don`t know what I`m talking about, a quick recap: a video of slogans that were chanted at the Karachi march were deliberately uploaded with fake captions that were intended to `prove that the gathered women committed blasphemy in full public view. The results were as anticipated: a fine crop of cancer bloomed, a bountiful harvest of hate on which countless locusts descended to feast.

I get it: you hate the Aurat March. You hate the slogans. You hate the temerity of these women to say out loud what you don`t even want whispered. To lay bare what you would prefer to be swept under a rug already bulging with decades of accumulated filth. I get it, and it`s okay: you have every right to hate and criticise. To counter and rebut.

What you do not have is the right to spreadlies and threatenlives byinventing and weaponising blasphemy charges. And if you`re one of the many who shared that falsely captioned video, perhaps adding your own vitriolic take and spin to it, if you`re one of those who didn`t bother to ask or verify but went ahead and shared it knowing full well that in this country the mere accusation of blasphemy is evidence, knowing full well that trial is by ordeal and that the sentence is always death, then if someone acts on the lies you have spread there is blood on your hands. You are an accessory to murder, just like you`re already guilty of incitement to murder.

And if you`re the one who placed those false captions in the first place, knowing full well what you were doing, then you`re likely guilty of what you`re accusing others of. But don`t let that bother you, because while it is routine to have those falsely accused of blasphemy languish in jail for years on end (I could give you a list but why would you care?) it is unheard ofto have those making false accusations face the wrath of the law. In his landmark judgement on the Asiya Bibi case former chief justice Asif Khosa made clear that the statutory punishment for those who bore false witness in that case should have been life imprisonment but that he was letting that go due to the `sensitivity` of the case. In the light of that it seems almost silly to say that you`re also in violation of cybercrime laws.

So rest easy. No one`s coming for you.

You get to go back to your lives without sparing a thought for the wreckage of those you leave in your poisonous wake.

You get to live with the fact that you have measured lives against social media likes.

For those of my colleagues (and I use this term loosely at best) in the media who also jumped on this bandwagon: know that your temporary pulpit and transitory fame is not worth someone`s blood. Know that you have a responsibility above that of others, and if because of your actions someone decides to pave their road to heavenwith the bones of those you have falsely accused then that guilt will haunt you forever.

Or maybe not.

After all, you`re in good company now, joining as you have the ranks of the extremists rallying just last week, baying for the blood of the marchers. You`llbe seen as standing with the Tehreek-iTaliban, the murderers of countless Pakistanis who are also threatening the marchers.

For those who were `mistaken` it may help, in the future, to apply some common sense and ask: in a country where the hint of blasphemy is a death sentence why would a group of women raise such slogans in public and in broad daylight? Ask yourself why you were so eager to believe, so ready to froth at the mouth, your eyes red and hands trembling as you vented your misplaced rage while forgetting the very fundamentals of the profession you claim.

Know also that if the worst happens, you`ll delete your tweets and apologise, but you cannot restore a life the way you restore a deleted item from the recycle box on your computer. Death is a little more permanent than that, and a lot more real than your temporary pulpit.  The writer is a journalist.

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