**Independence for whom?**

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On August 14, 2020, I wrote: “Every year for the past twenty years, when August arrives, I suddenly go quiet. August holds so much weight for us – but for those like me, who have their roots trailing through a land that still isn’t free, roots that stretch endlessly, it’s difficult to know where you’re from. I have a passport that says where I was born; is that my only identity? The Partition is perhaps a trauma I'll carry forever. I'll give it to my children – wrapped in a bow. I have a homeland, but is it mine? I speak its language, I wear its clothes, I sing its songs. Am I allowed to have it? Please say yes.”

What good is a homeland that won’t unclench its fingers around my neck? I used to happily wave a green and white flag – sohni dharti Allah rakhe. But Pakistan has too easily opened itself to hate. (I won’t call my country ‘she’. To do so, would admit defeat that yes, men are trampling all over ‘her’.)

This piece was supposed to be a tribute to Noor Mukadam, a beautiful soul murdered at the hands of savage Zahir Jaffer in Islamabad. But every time I opened the document, a new #JusticeFor[Insert Name] had been trending. How many of us have to die at the hands of men for this country to see how desperately we need change? Even in the aftermath of such horrors – even after death – Pakistan does not afford a woman the liberty of being believed. We poke and prod until men are convinced that it was not their fault, that the woman must have done something – anything – to provoke such an attack. I am writing on behalf of Pakistani women whose lives were cut short by men – because these women do not have anyone but other women to defend them.

Pakistani women are figuratively killed at inception. We've been told to step into neat little boxes, where we cannot speak, we cannot wear this or that, for we are unsuspecting prey for Pakistani men. But Pakistani women will rise – ‘hum dekhenge’. When that day arrives, perhaps I too can rev the engine of a motorcycle across the roads that are rightfully mine just as the men who currently leer at me do.

As I began writing this, horrific news of a woman being assaulted by hundreds of men on August 14 in front of Minar-e-Pakistan came forward. From dusk till night, through calls to prayer, 400 Pakistani men celebrated Independence Day doing what they know best: humiliating a woman. The video went viral: a woman’s trauma was put on display for men and women alike to judge – and judge they did. Why was she there? Why was she making TikTok videos? Why didn’t she know any better? Enough is enough. Why does Pakistani society have unwavering compassion for criminal men? Why are men never directly blamed? It's always their upbringing, society, or lack of better judgment that is named as the perpetrator of gender-based violence. When in fact it is the men themselves who are vile.

This is no longer a fear that creeps in the back of our minds. It is a cruel reality that occurred in daylight and not a single soul tried to stop it. My grandmother hastily walks me through the streets of every market, lamenting how I refuse to wear a dupatta. When I feel guilty enough, I don one but that doesn’t stop the stares. I am incredibly tired of shrinking myself for men lest they cannot contain themselves. We’ve known for a long time that they don’t just stop at the stares. The woman repeatedly held down as men did whatever they wanted will haunt August 14 for the rest of our lives.

The woman’s only crime was that she was proud to be Pakistani. She was brave enough to stake a claim in her country in front of the very site where Pakistan was conceptualized. Minar-e-Pakistan marks the site of the Lahore Resolution, ironically insisting that “adequate, effective and mandatory safeguards should be specifically provided in the constitution for minorities …” To see the country our ancestors had so much faith in holding this much space for such regressive beliefs is nothing short of disgraceful. I ask, then: what should we celebrate on August 14?

The men who descended upon this woman knew what they were doing – and they took glee in what they were doing. Amongst the crowd were young boys, barely teenagers. Following in their fathers’, uncles’, and brothers’ footsteps, it is apparent that the next generation of Pakistani men will be no different. We are smugly told that it is not all men but is 400 not enough? Men ask me “All men, so your father and brother too?” thinking that it is a loophole to my feminism. It is not. These 400 men were fathers, brothers, sons, and uncles. So yes, it is all men. Men readily take up arms against me when I say this: a tiny phrase borne from centuries of oppression causes an insidious uproar from men but excuses are made when that same violence occurs in front of them.

I don’t want to set off fireworks for a country that only pretends to care when the cruelest of crimes occur. The sinister misogyny lurking in the shadows is just as ruthless. I see the new generation of Pakistani women being told to make themselves smaller lest the men outside kill them. The wonder at the world slowly dims in my nine-year-old cousin every time she is told to cover up, to not ask questions, to sit properly. There is no solace even within the four walls of a home. We are so stubborn in our supposed love of culture that we let it eat us alive. We are so used to letting men escape accountability. And we are so proud when a boy is birthed – and for what?

I often question why we are told to be afraid of men. We all know the answer: to men we are nothing but extensions of their egos. We may have resigned ourselves to this horrible, automated answer but that does not make it right. Is this the azaadi the Quaid wanted for us? I refuse to celebrate this country until it abides by the values it was created upon and guarantees women the same luxury it willingly bestows upon its men. We will never be forced into faux-patriotism until the keys to our freedom are given back. It is delusional to believe that this patriarchy won’t end – because one by one, the women of Pakistan will fight back. I can only pray that it happens in my lifetime.

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