**Noor of our nation**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-07-28

I DID not know Noor Mukaddam personally, but I am related to her family and thus to their suffering. But one does not have to know Noor or be related to her to be utterly gutted and devastated by her death. The circumstances of the case are well-known by now and it would be accurate to say that they have devastated an entire country.

Moments of such deep and soul-crushing tragedy are rare; they stun and surprise not simply as a consequence ofindividualfactsbutalsointheircapacity to reveal the f ace of the nation that may at other times be obscured by the bows and baubles society affixes to pretty itself up.

It is also a moment when we are all shaken by moral whiplash, slapped awake and forced to confront the absolute brutality of the society we have created, one that permitted a killing whose horror must never leave us. Noor has lef t us truly light has left us sitting with this record of our astonishing failure in the darkness of grief.

Noor`s death came in the wake of a lurid melee of cases of Pakistani men slaughtering Pakistani women. Just days before her death, Pakistan, or rather those Pakistanis who mourn such crimes and killings, had witnessed another act of bloodthirsty femicide. Quratulain, whose picture as a beautiful glowing bride was put side by side with the photo of her bruised and battered corpse, was killed allegedly by her husband.

If her bloated and beaten f ace were not devastating enough, there was the testimony of her young daughter narrating, in the lilting, sing-song voice of a child, the moment-by-moment narrative of how her mother was beaten to death. She said, he put on songs to drown out the noise of the torture but she, along with her three younger siblings, heard everything. She saw it, too, her mother being doused in water and shivering in the air conditioning, the punches and the beating her father dealt out, a dying mother whose cries for help were unheard or ignored.

When it was all over, her father reportedly went to sit in the car and drink, leaving the children, the youngest only two years old, in the house with their mother`s corpse. Society`s truth falls off the lips of children, pure and untouched as they are by thefilth of ulterior motives and the dictates of ego that taint the rest of us. Pakistan`s truth is that we kill women and leave children to watch over their bodies.

Quratulain`s murderer is behind bars for the moment, but he need not worry. If you can count on one thing in Pakistan, it is the unceasing march of murders of women; one happened today, another yesterday and several more will occur before the week is out.

Sitting in his jail cell, her alleged killer can feelconfident, even smug, that the attention given to Noor will perhaps turn public attention away from him, and he, the son of a locally powerful man in Hyderabad, will be quietly bailed out of prison and roam free. In Pakistan in 2021, monsters roam loose but women are restrained, constrained, maimed and killed. No one has even thought about what he might do to the little girl, his daughter, who told everyone the truth about how her mother was murdered in cold blood.

As if on cue, to illustrate just how rich men walk free, Shah Hussain, the monster who brutally stabbed law student Khadija Siddiqui 23 times, walked out of prison on July 24 without completing his sentence, which was a paltry five years in the first place. We forgive the killers, we forget the crimes and we bury the women. Shah Hussain is roaming around as if nothing had happened, as if the life of a woman he stabbed has not been ruined.

Somewhere in our midst are those Pakistanis who are truly anguished and ashamed of how thiscountry failed Noor Mukaddam and all those who have come before her. For them, the challenge of the coming days will be to translate grief into action and into attention. Public scrutiny plays a role in pushing prosecutorial action, in ensuring that the government and authorities do not drop the ball, that the parents of a killer do not pretend to empathise with the victim in one moment and refuse to turn over evidence in the other.

There is no doubt that it is the continuity of public attention that will ensure that a killer caught red-handed with the victim`s blood all over him be made to pay for his crimes. Concerned Pakistanis who want this to be a turning point must put their heads together to see how they can create Facebook groups, news update alerts, and newsletters so that f actual information about the cases (rather than all the anonymous hearsay circulating on social media) can be shared.

Change has evaded Pakistan until now, but perhaps the new tools of virtual connection can bring together an army of the grieving whose goal is not to vanquish any foreign nation but rather to do what generations before them have failed to do, to create a Pakistan that does not just belong to men.

The death of Noor Mukaddam, the deaths of so many women who have died at the hands of bloodthirsty men, is what weighs on us now. It is as if the sheer horror of Noor`s case has suddenly made us all feel the burden of the bodies of dead women killed by our inability to punish men. The rage, the helplessness, the recurrent thoughts of what was done for her, have left us all grief-stricken and gasping. We grieve for Noor but we also gasp at the truth that Pakistan is a femicidal nation where we silence all women who disobey, anger or even irritate a man.

The only deliverance f rom our collective tragedy is through a collective reckoning unlike anything before, a piece-by-piece dissection of just how we became the sort of society where darkness kills the light. The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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