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**Now, after the Aurat March**

The Aurat March has provoked an unprecedented explosion of words, including some very colourful language. I hesitate to classify what has happened since playwright Khalilur Rehman Qamar verbally assaulted human rights activist Marvi Sirmed on national television, as ‘debate’ or ‘conversation’ because no matter how much technology evolves, and no matter how many teenaged-brained men come to possess a smartphone or laptop, the basic rules of human interaction remain valid and must be applied without compromise.

Name-calling, brick-throwing and slut-shaming is not discourse, it is not debate, it is not ‘a different view’. It is abuse. Abuse is not the same as discourse.

And yes, abuse, no matter who indulges in it, is problematic. But even here, some rules apply. The abuse of an oppressed class, for example Indian Muslims calling Narendra Modi names, is different from the abuse of the oppressor, for example, white men attacking Hijabi women on public transport in London.

In one case, we understand how fed up and powerless the ‘abuser’ has been made to feel by her or his lot in life (living under the boot of a Hindutva regime). In the other, we look down upon race-entitled, braggadocios with a fundamental lack of respect for otherness (Tommy Robinson \*\*\*\*bois on weekend benders).

The explosion of words sparked by the assertion of human authority and autonomy over their anatomical perimeter (or ‘body’) is not unique. ‘Mera Jism, Meri Marzi’ is deemed provocative because it is uttered by women. Every assertion of a less powerful subject, in the face of intimidation by a more powerful oppressor, creates the exact same dynamic.

The oppressor doesn’t like his privilege to be challenged. I am personally guilty of (prematurely) celebrating Barack Obama’s election in 2008 as the great telos of race relations in the United States. I spoke privately and publicly back then, about the “post racial” potential of America. But the equilibrium lost in the heat of the post Obama moment in 2008, was regained quickly.

When ‘Black Lives Matter’ became a rallying cry not for African American communities across the US, the reaction was not the post-racial hug that one may have expected of America, but instead the white privilege pushback. The bruised egos of closet racists in ghettos and golf resorts from the East Coast to the Golden State were manifest in a range of slogans, from ‘All Lives Matter’, to ‘Blue Lives Matter’, to the most potent and defining of them all: ‘Make America Great Again!’.

Being wrong is a privilege for those willing to embrace the process of cognizance. Allowing single moments of change to shape our understanding of society, its history, and its future is dangerous for two reasons.

The first is that we may be guilty of ‘over-privileging’ a moment. A good example of this is the euphoria millions of Pakistani democrats felt during the early hours of March 17, 2008 when the judiciary was restored and the Lawyers’ Movement seemed to have delivered the country a permanent respite from the machinations of despots. Little did we know that in that moment, our country had manufactured a wholly new kind of dictatorial instinct – one that has the risk of being practised by lordships with the conviction of righteousness via suo moto.

Most of us participating in the Lawyers’ Movement had not adequately analyzed the potential risks of success. This is why the second act of former CJ Iftikhar Chaudhry and Justice Saqib Nisar’s term as chief justice came as such profound shocks. We ‘over-privileged’ the Lawyers’ Movement moment. Rule Number One: careful what you wish for, you just might get it.

The second is that we may be guilty of a more germane kind of cognitive bias about the responses to ‘single moments’. The Obama victory in 2008, and the many very specific gains he won for believers in a level playing field were motherhood and apple pie for millions of Americans, and many others around the world – like Obama fans in Pakistan.

But any victory for one, means defeat for another. Who was losing when Obama won? It wasn’t just the late great John McCain that lost that day. Indeed, what was lost on that day was the decency, self control and restraint of the McCains of the world. Angry, non-coloured America has taken revenge for the Obama years by electing Donald Trump as president. The era of McCain-esque balance and restraint has been replaced not just by Trumpism, but by a more profound shift of the public discourse. Rule Number Two: Losers fight back when they lose. And they fight hard.

Single-moment euphoria is dangerous therefore both in the short term, because we read too much into the moment, and in the long term, because power is fluid and dynamic – and the contest for power is never-ending.

Male privilege in South Asia has enjoyed an historic run. South Asian women have endured the worst instincts of multiple civilizations, and been buried by each one. For the honour of the South Asian man, South Asian women endure fire, acid, bricks, sticks and stones. Unwanted hands, tongues and pics in their inboxes. Unwanted labels in the public discourse. Unwanted proposals in their drawing rooms. Unwanted attention at every turn. And at the end of the road, the assertion of autonomy over their anatomy is reduced to perverted notions of what the word ‘jism’ implies.

Of course, the problem isn’t with ‘jism’. The problem is with ‘marzi’. But to dig that deep would require a per-capita population of mental health professionals that we just don’t enjoy in this region. And in the meantime, every tweet, or interview, or op-ed that is seemingly standing with the constitutionally protected rights that the Aurat March organisers agitate for, is affirmation of the grand conspiracy (sic) to poison a country and culture in which over 22 million children still do not attend school, in which young women are awarded to opposing tribes when a youngster falls in love across tribal lines, in which maternal deaths per 1,000 births continues to be a world beating metric, and in which the proportion of public funding for education, health, water and sanitation and social protection, continue to be miniscule compared to the overall consumption of public funds.

The large turnout and relatively safe conduct of the Aurat March is a single-moment. But the real story will be lost in the moment. The real story is the crisis of masculinity that the assertion of basic, fundamental rights has exposed across the spectrum of class, gender and consumption. The real story is the cultural wars that have emerged in an already Digital Pakistan – for which neither the state nor society are prepared. The real story are the unreported abortions forced upon women carrying female foetuses, or the unrelenting pregnancies forced upon women expected to carry male foetuses.

The real story is a mental health crisis manifest in profanity-laced tirades, on and off camera, that men indulge in constantly and repetitively, when confronted by that which they deem not worthy of confronting them.

To tell these stories will require patience, compassion and understanding. These are not issues that will affect only one kind of Pakistani – but all kinds. The Aurat March is the single moment that can be a portal for an array of real conversations. The women organisers of Aurat March have done their bit. It is up to us to pick up the pieces, to relent from our instinct for abuse, and to engage in real discussion and debate. Are we up to it?

The writer is an analyst and commentator.