

# Pakistan: The imagined threat of the 'modern' woman

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**Last week marked the second death anniversary of Qandeel Baloch, murdered by her own family members. While this tragedy led to an outpouring of sympathy for the victim, it also instigated a vitriolic response by those condemning Qandeel's 'conduct' - as though the scandal was not the murder of a girl by her brothers but about the wardrobe choices she made. The incident highlighted the faultlines in the public sphere regarding the role of women in society, as well as popular responses to the violence directed at them.**

The more recent case of Khadija, whose class fellow from an influential family almost got away with stabbing her (a total of 23 times), highlights how women remain vulnerable to masculine rage both in the public and private sphere in Pakistan.

We need to have an in-depth discussion on the nature of gender relations in Pakistan, since it is the toxicity of the machismo culture that is responsible for much of the violence directed at women. If we are to begin to overcome the tragedy of relations between genders in our society, we should first dispel the idea that dominance in these relations in Pakistan is somehow naturally given, and not a contingent accident of our history and geography. In other words, we must acknowledge that time and space melt away the rigid ideas of a gendered essence, which should prompt us to search for historical reasons to comprehend our current predicament.

To understand the historical trajectory of gender relations in South Asia, one has to re-examine the colonial era. For colonial officials, men in the Subcontinent lacked appropriate masculine traits, including strength, valour and a sense of purpose. Furthermore, the civilisational discourse relegated Indian men to savages in relation to women, beginning a racialised project to save 'brown women from brown men'. Much of colonial violence against indigenous populations in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was justified by invoking such civilisational missions.

In an influential essay on the place of women in the national imagination, Indian scholar Partha Chatterjee suggests that in a world dominated by the British Empire, Indian social reformers aimed to locate the essence of the Indian nation. While accepting that the West now had an unquestionable superiority over Indians in the public sphere, nationalist thinkers claimed that the nation had to be preserved and enhanced in the private sphere. Two institutions, religion and family, became central sites for marking the nation's distance from Western values. This partly explained why unlike Europe, where these two institutions witnessed a sharp decline in their centrality to the social edifice, the role of religion and family strengthened in India under modernity.

Women occupied a central role in embodying the values and honour of the nation. In relation to colonial power, leading nationalist figures could claim that despite the temporary weakness of the nation in the public sphere, the honour of the nation remained intact in the private domain of the family. The problem, however, was that this 'pure' inner domain of the nation did not actually exist outside the imagination of the elite, and therefore had to be constructed through a pedagogical

process. The women's magazines, digests and other publications proliferating in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were geared towards the formation of an 'ideal' modern woman – rational and brave, yet obedient in front of the man of the house.

Such texts often aimed at producing a homogeneous conception of a 'modern' woman through certain standardised practices. This explains the constant refrain even in contemporary South Asia, where the ideal woman is often defined as neither too 'liberal' nor too 'backward', but an ideally 'moderate' person navigating the paradoxical position of at once embodying modernity and tradition.

The *raison d'être* for such homogenising tendencies was to develop an adequate conception of a nation that did not reproduce the civilisational hierarchies produced by the British. Yet, this nationalist fervour came at the cost of female agency, since the burden of carrying the honour of the family, the tribe, the community and the nation was all imposed on the female body, which had to be perpetually regulated.

The sinister consequences of this imagination became fully apparent with the Partition violence in 1947. Women's bodies, which represented communal honour, were targeted to 'dishonour' an entire community in a shockingly systematic deployment of rape as a tactic during the communal riots among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. This demonstrates why suggestions that sexual violence is somehow linked to a woman's wardrobe choices are dangerously naive.

The suffering experienced by women in 1947, particularly in Punjab, had nothing to do with the lifestyle choices they made. They can only be explained by the complex entanglement of nationalism and honour at a time of meltdown in the state machinery, with the ability to 'protect' or 'attack' women becoming part of the calculus for establishing the respectability of each community. It also shows why incidents of harassment/rape become more embarrassing for the victim and her family, rather than for the perpetrators of these heinous crimes.

While the inculcation of an 'ideal' femininity under colonial conditions was geared towards building an anti-colonial project, its presence as an anachronistic hangover in contemporary Pakistan (and India) is even more toxic, since it lacks any sense of purpose. The increasing feminisation of the labour force has propelled hundreds of thousands of women into the job market. Yet, rigid attitudes towards female mobility, personal ambitions or romantic desires have resulted in a dangerous gulf between the practical/financial logic of modernity and the stubborn ideological frameworks through which gender relations are understood.

This widening gap leads to extreme reactions when female members of the family make choices out of sync with dominant expectations, with violence directed at them becoming the final arbitrator for conserving the family's honour. The use of such violence, as in the case of Qandeel Baloch, is not an example of the strength of the family, but its increasing fragility in the wake of changing gender practices in society, a fact that has not yet found a new conceptual and political vocabulary.

Obsessing over the exact role of women in society is a practice that, if at all, belongs to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and should have no place at a moment in history in which women have proven themselves capable in the most diverse fields. It is time to simply do away with the entire (constructed) tradition of rigid gender binaries. In an era that is witnessing increased pressure on stable identities, the idea of maintaining fixed conceptions of community, honour and femininity is more utopian than the practical necessity to transform them.

Such an ideological transformation would aid in reducing the toxic anxiety of feminine purity, remove the stigma from women's bodies and propel female participation in the public sphere. More importantly, by focusing on issues other than the 'provocative' nature of female presence, we can

collectively place all our energies on resolving issues such as poverty, violence, corruption and climate change, themes that pose a much greater danger than the pervasive, but imagined, threat of familial dishonour.

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**P.S.**

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