

Pakistan and the unbearable heaviness of testosterone

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As the country frenzies towards a revolution and annihilation of the 'status quo' with a powerful dose of 'change,' one does feel rather underwhelmed by the testosterone-infected political rhetoric all around. The paternalism of the discourse is as much 'status quo' as are the clerics, pirs, land mafia dons and industrialists leading this revolution. It is as much about the physical absence of women from the center-stage of high-powered political negotiation processes, as it is about the prevalent and ambivalent sexism in the mainstream discourse.

Ambivalent sexism is not very different from ambivalent racism, which is now more codified, enveloped, subtle and intricate in the contemporary world, rather than being as stark and un-confronted as it was in the 20th century. The explicit racism of the pre civil rights movement went under the silk of sophistication at some point, and at others, transformed him/her into the form of a positive, assertive and benign racist who would be 'well-meaning' towards the 'weaker' race. Almost the same applies to the sexists of that era and the contemporary one (although sexism would come much more into play compared to racism because men and women would be in contact with one another much more frequently and continually than the races).

It is sexism when women are rendered weaker, feebler, floppier, flimsier and slighter as humankind. Sexist diction would reflect hostility towards women. Sometimes overtly, and at others in a shrouded manner. Sometimes with offensive arrogance towards women, at others with subjective positivity. It is so convoluted in the contemporary world that one would not even identify the sexist antipathy while imperceptibly endorsing a (benevolent) sexist argument.

This wide scale canvas of sexism - the ambivalent sexism - that patronizes women as the 'farer' (or fairer?) sex, pronounces them 'kinder', 'beautiful', 'the caring' ones, the 'precious' and the 'fragile' ones who need to be 'protected' and 'taken care of'. Remember *wajud-e-zann se hay tasveer-e-ka'aenaat main rang?* This huge responsibility of being beautiful, caring, kind and sin-free, is generally not shared by men. Men have the luxury of being human enough to err. And how profusely they keep using this luxury!

Over the decade, the political discourse in Pakistan has gone unambiguously ambivalent into sexism. Gone are the days when a leading (male) politician could call a woman politician a 'taxi' (colloquial for a sex-worker) on the floor of the House of parliament, and get away with it. These are not the days when a leading columnist can write that women working in NGOs are indulging in '*suththan*' (trousers) diplomacy, alluding to the perception of their being sexually promiscuous, and also get away with it with the general endorsement of the journalist community.

These are different times. Now we do innovative things. We throw bangles on men when we want to say they are weak and cowardly. When we hate a male politician, we say he is effeminate. When we hate him even more, we call him a transvestite. If you are hate-worthy, you must be like women. You must have less masculinity. If you are powerful and strong, you must have more testosterone. In order to be more respectful and loved, you have to be more 'male'.

If you want to showcase your strength and power and influence, you must flaunt your testosterone. More of it wins you more accolades. That is how politics is played nowadays by all sides. Whether it is an enlightened moderate dictator or popularly elected prime minister/ chief minister, they have to display their testosterone. By speaking at the top of their throats, by sounding rough and harsh, by resorting to violent and aggressive vocabulary, by calling their opponent lacking in 'maleness.'

There are even more subtle forms of sexist behavior. You are a well-meaning progressive. So you won't call a woman weak. But if you insist on paternity to trace your lineage, you're still a sexist (however a benevolent one). Most of our revolution mongers and our 'educated' urban middle classes have lately been very worried about the lineage of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the chairperson of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), who chose to use the family names of both his parents as his surname.

The irony is, the counter argument from a self-proclaimed progressive and secular PPP involves nothing but religion. Since the progeny of Prophet (PBUH) traces its lineage from the daughter of the Prophet, it is ok to do so for Bilawal as well. There is no one in the political arena who could stand up and challenge this patriarchal norm. No one is ready to pronounce that every human being has a maternal and paternal share of blood. No one is likely to reject the paternalism in favor of an inclusive and more realistic lineage with matrilineal linkages. If Sanjay Leela Bansali (the film maker who chose his mother's name as his surname) was a pincher for India, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is a shock for Pakistan.

When Maryam Nawaz Sharif was being disparaged on social media for not using her husband's name as her surname, one was obliged to revert to the history of women's post-marriage name. The norm of changing a woman's surname after marriage is neither supported in humanist and feminist terms, nor is it supported by cultural traditions. Whether it is the Arabic society of the seventh century or later, or it is South Asian society, women using their husbands' surname is alien to both cultures. Hazrat Khadija (RA) never became Khadija Mohammad. Nor was Sita called Mrs. Ram or Sita Ram Chandra. The progeny however, has been known by either paternal or maternal lineage.

There have been matrilineal societies in the US, UK, China, South Asia (India and Sri Lanka) and Africa till as late as the twentieth century. The latest matrilineal clan existed in Guinea Bissau till the 1970s. Not to say that the world should now move totally to a matrilineal or uterine lineage system. On the contrary, the contemporary feminist is more likely to argue for a world where uterine lineage is not looked down upon, is not jibed contemptuously and is not outrightly rejected.

It would be too much to expect from Tahirul Qadri or Imran Khan to be progressive enough to accept women's share in the political process, not as mere participants of their rallies but as major arbiters of their narrative too. It would also be too much to expect from Bilawal Bhutto to be feminist enough to pronounce his matrilineal identity just as loudly as he vows to take Kashmir. His choice of surname probably comes from his political obligations. It is, yet, very important for the civil society, intelligentsia and the political class to shun the anti-women discourse of outrightly rejecting uterine-lineage choice.

This is the 21st century, may I remind our testosterone-infected politicians and intellectuals. It is high time to stop being sexist idiots. Harsh? So is your sexism.

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P.S.

* "The unbearable heaviness of testosterone". The Nation (Pakistan):

<http://nation.com.pk/columns/21-Oct-2014/the-unbearable-heaviness-of-testosterone>

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