

Of Bras and Breasts

By

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“34A,” she said with unequivocal finality, like a judge pronouncing a verdict upon which rested the fate of someone’s life. As she rolled the measuring tape into neat, corkscrewed spirals across her finger, ambling towards the rack at the end of the room to fish out my size, little did I know that she had indeed pronounced a verdict that would determine the fate of my womanhood for all times to come.

I was thirteen when my mother took me shopping for my first bra; a rite of passage trip from girlhood to womanhood that had been cruelly postponed for me by almost a year. In my friend group, I was a latecomer to the bra-wearing process, still sulking under the weight of splaying, unruly flesh where my girlfriends sported a voluptuous firmness that I could only envy. During the lunch break, they would have bra-related conversations with exaggerated solemnity, in hushed whispers, unwrapping their *paratha-andas* squeezed into tiny tiffin boxes and periodically scanning their surroundings with fleeting gazes to make sure no one was listening. They would whine about the painful grooves that hours of wearing a bra left on their backs, compare the quality and price of different brands, speak in the foreign matrix of letters and numbers that defined their breasts as they contrasted sizes, lamented the labor of finding 34B or 32C in a particular brand, or coyly described a lacey red bra they had seen dangling invitingly under a flashy “Make Your Wedding Night a Night to Remember” banner in the undergarments section of a cosmetics shop. Naturally, I was excluded from these conversations, muted by the harrowing lateness of the fleshy mutation that was to announce my ascent from girlish naivety into womanly dignity.

One day, in seventh grade, we were walking back to our classroom after a particularly grueling session during our Physical Training period. On the way back, many girls made discrete detours to the canteen to hurriedly gulp a chilled bottle of Shezan mango juice, a temporary yet heavenly respite from the heat, before heading

back into the sweaty stickiness of our classroom on the second floor. As we haggled with Qaiser Bhai, the *canteen-walay-uncle*, I noticed our PT teacher, Miss Bushra, sternly resting her gaze on Saira, one of the girls in my friend group. As Saira chugged her bottle of juice, Miss Bushra walked over and whispered something to her that made a confused Saira follow her to the staff room. She did not return until the third and fourth periods were over. When she finally did, a white chiffon scarf that was not part of our uniform meticulously wrapped around her neck, everyone could tell she had been crying. Everyone was itching in their seats to ask her; where did Miss Bushra take her? Why was she crying? However, as Mrs. Naveed, our Math teacher, filed into the classroom for the fifth period, we were forced to begrudgingly swallow our questions, for the time being, throwing furtive glances at a teary-eyed Saira as she took a seat at the far back.

When the bell finally chimed, signaling the commencement of the lunch break, it sounded like the muezzin's call to the *maghrib* prayer in Ramazan, fleetingly sweet in its announcement of the end of a test of patience. Instead of wrestling with hunger and thirst, we had wrestled with the burning curiosity to mine out the details of Saira's predicament for almost an hour and gravitated towards her like moths to a dying flame at the ringing of the bell. But Saira was cruel in her silence. As the girls in the class harangued her with questions, some out of selfless concern, some to collect fodder for the lunchtime gossip, and some wanted to know out of sheer self-preservation what Saira had been so severely reprimanded for so they could avoid it themselves, she wormed her way out of the animated crowd, beckoning only her group of friends, including me, to follow her. The message was clear; the test of patience was only over for a few. We tailed her out of the classroom, wordlessly gloating in the exclusivity she had bestowed upon us by denying answers to the rest of

the girls, who dwindled out of sight, dejected. Growing up, nothing hurts more than not being let in on a secret.

Outside, in a secluded corner of the ground, Saira was a sobbing mess. Periodically readjusting the white chiffon scarf wrung around her neck like a noose, she finally told us, between sniffles, what had happened with Miss Bushra in the staff room. She had slapped her. Twice. That was not surprising; almost every girl in our school had been slapped by a teacher at least once. But the reason Saira was slapped did come off as a surprise. The color of her bra had been too bright; a shocking pink that flagrantly made its presence known under the clean white of our uniform *kameez*. Miss Bushra had seen Qaiser Bhai craning his neck above the tiny, makeshift green awning of the canteen to have a good look at the pink floating under the white; she was furious at Saira for making such a spectacle of her body. She had called Saira the one word we were all afraid of being called as young girls; *besbaram*. Without shame. She lectured Saira for two hours on the necessity of guarding her body now that she was becoming a woman. Warned her she never wanted to see her boasting her womanhood like that; never wanted to see her in a bra that was not nude or white. She also draped that scarf across Saira's bosom, a temporary fix for her shamelessness.

But Saira was more confused than ashamed. "I don't get it, I don't understand," she would repeat between sobs. Why was there such a fuss over the color of her bra? Why must she be slapped because of it? And why was it such a big deal if people could tell that she was wearing a bra? She could not understand, and frankly, neither could I. But a part of me, a festering, bitter part of me that was consumed with jealousy for my friend's perfect, bra-contoured breasts as compared to my own shapeless ones, was elated. Elated at the thought of Saira being punished for

the womanhood held back from me. Look at her, I thought, so womanly in her new bra, aching to tell the world that she is no more a little girl, flaunting the newfound firmness in her breasts, making me feel so small and pathetic. Serves her right, I thought. That part of me scavenged the opportunity to satiate some of the resentment which had comfortably settled into a wound in my heart. That part of me gnawed away at my conscience to magnify the sting of Miss Bushra's slaps with the sting of my words. So I did. "Miss isn't wrong, you know. You were looking shameless, Saira. Even my mother says girls should not wear dark-colored bras." That was not true. In fact, my mother and I had not even had a conversation about bras, even though when we did, this was one of the first things she had said to me. But back then, I had just wanted to hurt Saira. I had just wanted to avenge my womanhood by swearing vengeance upon another woman.

Saira was nonplussed by what I had said. It took her a whole minute to respond. I suppose, like myself, she too had been stunned by the amount of venom that had come out of my mouth. Or perhaps she had been stunned by the betrayal; I had broken the vow of sisterhood that is never spoken but breeds silently between girls that age. Its presence is taken for granted but in its absence, it leaves behind a gaping hole that swallows you. It swallowed me and Saira whole.

"How would you know anything about a bra? You don't even wear one. In fact, it looks like you won't be wearing one for a long time," she said, her eyes lingering pitifully on the sad flatness of my chest. A part of me had always known that my status in the League of the Bra-Wearing Girls was honorary, subject to being revoked at whim. A part of me had always known that ever since my friends started wearing bras, I had become a guest who had overstayed her welcome. Growing up, nothing hurts more than not being let in on a secret, but growing up as a girl, nothing

hurts more than not being let in on the secrets of womanhood. But a part of me also suspected that, like myself, Saira hadn't truly meant what she had said. This was perhaps the biggest curse of womanhood; it translated anger at a world of men into anger at other women. I was angry at this world for demanding a pronounced swelling in my chest to acknowledge me as a woman. Saira was angry at Miss Bushra for shaming her for the color of her bra. Miss Bushra was angry at Qaiser Bhai for staring at Saira's breasts. Like all women, the three of us were locked in a matrix of misplaced anger that consumed no one but ourselves. Perhaps this was the most unforgivable sin of patriarchy. To render woman the oppressor of woman.

But what really broke me was that Saira had said it looked like I would not be wearing a bra for a very long time. That night, I prayed to God incessantly. For good breasts and good friends. The next morning, I begged my mother to let me wear a bra, but she was stubborn as ever. She insisted I did not need it yet. I did not care. Back then, I was just dying to be a woman. Back then, I did not know that to be a woman was essentially just that; to be dying. Slowly, painfully, with a smile on your face. That is what Bari Ammi, my mother's grandmother, did.

It was during the second last period at school, when all the girls were dispiritedly nodding at Mrs. David, our English teacher, and whiling away the slow melting of time towards the off-time bell. But my misery was cut short. Pervaiz Uncle, our guard, had come to our class with a paper slip signed by the Coordinator. He told Mrs. David that Areej Akhtar's father was there to pick her up early on account of a family emergency. I felt something in my stomach snap. Outside the gate, I saw Abba standing in front of our eight-year-old olive green Alto, with Mama, and both my siblings safely tucked inside. A sigh of relief. What was the emergency then? It was

Bari Ammi. We were to drive straight to Islamabad, where she had died, where she'd be buried.

As mourners descended upon Bari Ammi's 3-marla house, the funeral became a blur of choking. Soiled diapers dumped by mothers choking the toilet in the lone bathroom of the house, excesses of *biryani* rice from the unwashed plates choking the drain in the kitchen sink, one of the stray dogs outside howling at night as it choked on a fleshless bone one of the mourners might have dropped from their plate of chicken qorma, Baray Nana, my great-grandfather, choking on the grief that had knotted itself in his throat. It wasn't until I was seventeen that I found out Bari Ammi had died of breast cancer.

By the time she was diagnosed, cancer had spread to both her breasts. The only thing that could save her was a bilateral mastectomy; a surgery in which both her breasts would be removed. My mother told me that Bari Ammi vowed to never go to the doctor again. Her daughters begged her day and night, her sons knelt at her feet to persuade her, Baray Nana quit smoking to convince her, but she was unmoved. Like every other woman, she too believed her breasts were her most prized assets, the pinnacle of her womanhood, the glory of her femininity. Even when they were eating away at themselves. Even when they were killing her. At an age when I was dying to be a woman, Bari Ammi had actually died to be one.

A month before her death, Mama had gone to visit her in Islamabad. Like everyone else, she too put her plea before Bari Ammi, begged, whined, and cried her throat hoarse to get her to agree to the surgery. Mama told me that Bari Ammi had only blinked, and said, "*Aurat key jism ka sab sey kboobsurat hissa hota hai yeh. Yeh naa rahay tou aurat, aurat nahi rehti.*" That night, Bari Ammi's words resounded in my head

as I looked at my own flaccid breasts, small and droopy, nothing like the promising abundance that my mother was blessed with. I hated my breasts. I wished I wasn't a 34A. I wished I was something bigger, more feminine. Bari Ammi might have considered hers the most beautiful part of her body, but I did not think that way about mine. And I knew for a fact my then-boyfriend, Sameer, did not either. "They're so ... so, I don't know. Like tiny. Like flat. Doesn't feel like I am touching a woman," he would say. Doesn't feel like I am touching a woman, I thought, holding the limp flesh in my hands that night.

When I finally got my first padded push-up bra, a soft tea pink with a tiny bow in between, I felt feminine for the first time in my life, confident in the shapely tautness of my chest, and my womanhood. It hurt to wear it for extended periods of time. When I took it off before sleeping at night, the red furrows it had dug into my skin felt sore and itchy. Across my back, the tight straps had left knobbly depressions which burnt under the steaming hot water as I showered during winter. But pain was the price of being a woman in this world was something I had learned when I had gotten my first period, gripping my lower abdomen, shaking on the floor of my bedroom as the first pang of the cramps started settling in, making a home in my bleeding womb. Besides, the sore grooves and itchy indentations receded to the back of my mind as Sameer commented on the new firmness that the padded push-up bra bestowed upon me. "I don't know what you did to make your breasts look so good, but whatever it is, don't stop doing it," he said, squeezing one hard. In her book *Scherezade Goes West*, Fatime Mernissi writes, "To veil on the Muslim side of the Mediterranean is to dress as the ruling Imam demands. To be considered beautiful on the European side of the Mediterranean is to dress as the market-Imam demands." But the market-Imam was here too, and 34A was simply not big enough for him.

The year I started wearing push-up bras, my khala had a baby boy, but no milk to feed him. For hours at an end, she would sit on her bed, cross-legged, cradling baby Shahmir in the hook of her arm with a large dupatta draped across her bare breasts, but the milk never flowed. Three days after the delivery, my mother called Sumaira Baji, an eighty-something woman who was known in our neighborhood for having magic in her touch; one hour of breast massage by her and the milk would come spurting forth, women had sworn. But not even Sumaira Baji could remedy the barrenness of my khala's breasts, aching to be enveloped in the warmth of a child's mouth. "What kind of a woman cannot produce milk for her own child?" Khala would ask my mother.

When I think of breasts, I think of betrayals. Cruel and uncontested. I think of Bari Ammi, whiling away her afternoons on borrowed time in her tiny room as her breasts, the one part of her body which she had put so much faith in as a woman, rotted away in silence. I think of my khala, deceived by the stubbornness of her milkless breasts at the point in her life when she needed them the most; motherhood. And I think of myself, betrayed into being stuck in an overdue girlhood by the humiliating lateness of my breasts, and an even more humiliating womanhood by their sparse, unflattering size. Perhaps being a woman is about learning to take betrayals. From your body and from the world.

In my class on Harem Literature last semester, I read Malek Alloula's *The Colonial Harem*, a book that is essentially a compilation of picture postcards of Algerian women photographed, produced, and exploited by the French during their colonization of Algeria. Each picture in the book seeks to demystify the veiled Oriental woman, exposing her to the gaze of the colonial photographer who projects his own fantasy on her veiled body. But what I found so jarring about these pictures

was the abundance of breasts in them, splayed out perfectly for the spectator as the women who were posing retaliated silently with their eyes and postures. The violence done to these women's bodies in each photograph made me recoil in my seat. Later, I thought to myself, is it possible to humanize the one part of the female body that has been sexualized for centuries?

But maybe it is. I think of Bari Ammi, of Khala, of myself, each of us made human in our relationship with our breasts, each of us gripped by the one emotion that humanizes us; fear. Bari Ammi fearing the loss of her femininity, Khala fearing not being a good mother, and me fearing the inadequacy of my womanhood, of never being loved enough by a man because of it. Perhaps it was possible to humanize our breasts after all.

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