

The Silence of the Demented

By

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No one tells you of the loneliness that follows marriage. The finality of it. The deafening silence that follows in its wake. Or perhaps they spare you the gory details, the bloodbath, the tears. And you turn a blind eye to their subtle hints. You march onwards strung along with the promise of everlasting companionship. You don a pretty red dress and let the makeup artists play lab on your face. You emerge as a new woman, at the precipice of the loneliness that shall befall you. You marry, having exhumed your past—your past loves, the lives you lived, the pains you had endured, and the bonds you had formed. And you emerge a vindicated entity, destined to be enshrined in lores of great sacrifices and the drudge of domesticity. Soon to be forgotten. A virgin at an altar. You think you would be different. That a forked path would emerge in the history of womanhood, and unlike your mother and grandmother and great-grandmother, and all the forgotten women before them, you will take the one that leads to freedom, one that does not end in pain, bitterness, and a life ghettoized to the kitchen.

But women forget. Too soon. Too easily. They forget past pains, they forget past loves, and they forget the unwritten canon of female history. They forget their own oppression and become the newest victims of the Stockholm Syndrome that has held captive their previous generations. And they push the next generation through the same cycle of pain and misery that has haunted their lives, in the name of practicality, love, and safety.

As you push past your early twenties, a new worry now begins to occupy a sad little crevice in your mushy brain. Not a corner. Corners are neat. Women's brains are not. You know, the one like that video in which men's brains are divided into compartments and women's are more like a Picasso painting with noodles? Anyway, you fear dementia. It has haunted generations before you. Your grandmother died of it. So did your great-grandmother. And some before them, although their names you do not remember.

You read somewhere that women are more likely to suffer from senile dementia than men. In terms of ratio, two women to one man. In terms of percentage, a total of sixty-five percent of sufferers were women. An alarming variation. And this time, mercifully, with more women in medicine, questions have been asked and answered. Most agree it has something to do with estrogen while others attribute it to the varying levels of skills that are tested in the diagnosis procedure, which women with mild memory issues, tend to do well on.

But to you, it seems like an evolutionary process. A process to filter out pain, to ease the onslaughts of age. When you imagine this deliberate killing of each brain cell, this deterioration of the brain of women, you try to locate the time when an X chromosome suddenly decided that it would grant women a gift, make them forget, make them so incapable, that the drudgery of existence, of daily chores, of demands, would never haunt their last days.

You have known pain, a pain that now has been named generational trauma. Your pain has a nascent history though. It goes back only until the brutal partitioning of India, up to the point that women were raped, killed, butchered, and exchanged as payments for lost gambles. Else burnt alive to protect the honor of men. Look at what happened to Sadat Hassan Manto, when he could not witness the pain anymore. You cannot have half the population as characters from *Toba Tek Singh* now, can you?

Perhaps the women of your family have suffered too much (contrary to the narratives of the men that followed, and even women). These women of Kashmiri descent; small-boned and fair. Great cooks, better mothers, dependable neighbors. If you ever take a trip to the old Lahore's neighborhood of Sheranwala Gate and ask about your great-grandmother, Eido, you are likely to stumble upon a descendent of a child she had fostered

after the death of their mother. To you, it sounds almost like a fairytale. Daughter of a cloth merchant, married off to an orphan, at twelve, in lieu of her sister; who died a day before her marriage. And thus began Eido's life. Of beatings, and of forced smiles. Of childbirths and deaths and a body plagued with disease curable, yet not seen as a good financial investment.

She lived on. Outliving her husband. When you were born, she held you in her arms and bathed you, very much a master of her own mind.

You suspect it began later. When she had the time to reflect, with no more children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to busy herself with, no more cooking or cleaning to occupy her time. She began to unravel. She remembered each word, each assault, each microaggression. She remembered tiptoeing around her own house. From the man said to be her companion. Where could she stow away this pain? Her process began slow, mixing up names, forgetting past events, then recipes, and later language. During her last days though, she had forgotten her bodily functions.

When you think of this violent forgetting, you wonder about the process. Do women practice this active suppression of memory, until it becomes a habit? And then a large chunk of personality, until it takes over and defines them? That for once, you are no longer defined by your biology. But by the workings of your brain?

It is the irony that hits you. How for women to be defined by anything other than their biology, that thing has to completely break down? And is that not the very attitude towards women too?

Did you not keep forgetting each violent crime inflicted upon the bodies of women until there was a Noor Mukkadam slaughtered, a Malala Yousafzai shot, a Sabeen Mahmud target killed, a Zainab killed? How long did the silencing of women continue, before there was one deafening, complete silence?

You are afraid of this silence, for you have finally discovered that to survive, to truly live, you must speak. You must remember. In the words of Audre Lorde “My silence has not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.”

Your marriage began on a happier note. You married an ally. An embattled word, but you will use it, he fits the definition. Soon cracks had begun to appear, how you were conveniently handling all domestic chores, how you woke up early to cook breakfast. To say it became worse in actuality would be fallacious. But it became worst for you.

It was the loneliness that caught up to you first. Working from home, you felt unbearably alone in that little apartment of yours at the edge of the city. Even with your husband around, a chasm existed between you two. You found truth in Lorde’s words at this time. Language, at times, did fail you. Too cumbersome at times, too limited at others. But you employed poetry and it was never read. Or never read as a woman would read it. Through the light of her experience. Your pain read as dramatic flair, your words as accusations, and well, your bruised silence a truce.

So, when you could not bear it anymore, you adopted cats. One after the other. On the pretense of wanting one. Then rescuing another one. Then as a vanity.

At the risk of thrusting your voice upon other women, you now think you know why women want children (in circumstances in which they are given that choice). What

has been termed the natural instinct of motherhood, you have realized, is most often a search to stow away this incurable loneliness. You too have had that idea. Of having a child, or two, or a dozen. Not for old age. No, you have not thought so far ahead. Just until you have finally spoken all you want to speak. A child as the embodiment of all the unsaid poetry that rages inside you. That makes you want to brandish all those around you with hurt. You are the difficult-to-love woman in Warsan Shire's *For Women who are 'difficult' to love*. Perhaps, what comes of you may love you. May hear you, without demanding concrete facts and continuously explaining your misery to you.

But then you forget, you forget the pain, and the loneliness, and when you reach out to commit to paper, your mind blanks out. Or it flows out, all of it, like spewing unrestrained magma. Until the page starts wailing. So you erase it all. And smile and laugh, and break yourself in the kitchen until you fall exhausted onto the bed.

Is it tangible? This pain of being a woman? Of having such a superior power to feel? And to be made to feel such sacrilege? To be silenced.

So you worry now. When you walk into a room and forget what you intended to do, when you mix up names and when you cannot remember words, you worry. Is your silence finally going to subsume your insides? Leave rotten scraps of painful memories? Or happier ones?

But you were not such a damsel in distress, were you? You did try not to be silent. You pushed, you shoved, you lashed. You threw things. You broke every pretty little piece of crockery in the house, save your wedding bone-china. You told your mother the first time your husband finally landed a slap on your face. She shushed you, for what will your father do when he heard. And when you said you had finally had enough, that you wanted

to up and leave, you were again told that you should be thankful he does not hurt you. That he is not the possessive type. The suspicious type. The conservative type.

People gave away brownie points to men for upholding the minimal standards of humanity, well in the case of Pakistan, you give away women. Given away and silenced, until they eventually begin to rot inside. One cell at a time.

That of course is not to say, you had not seen violence. The violence you had seen much of, for small things as not wearing a dupatta, for bigger things as leaving without permission. Altruistic violence when you chased a man on the bike who had assaulted you and your parents screamed at you, fearing that you will get hurt for raising your voice. You saw violence until you learned to hide. You learned to ice your eyelids after a night of crying to make the swelling go down. To hide the slightly disheveled look when you had threatened men on the street with the slightest leverage. You learned to hide both your power and your vulnerability, behind a wall of silence.

That is until you could not anymore. You could not remain quiet without the suicide ideation. Without the psychotic need to slit open the next man who interrupted you. Without thinking of the time it would take for your husband to finally stop struggling under a pillow. Nothing violent for that loveable-yet-annoying man.

And then Covid arrived. It pushed many women into finding scurry little silent corners of the household, away from the gaze of the men who always had a command, a comment, an instruction, or a request on the tips of their tongues. Many found that safety in the kitchen. Covid heralded in a kind of violence you are still reeling to encapsulate, it merged those neat spheres that enabled women to say “this is mine”, without having to give up what was not deemed to be theirs. The men rushed in with their practicality,

reordering lives, homes, bonds, and routines. They reordered a few bones, too. A couple of us were deemed defunct and burnt or stabbed. And what of this other sphere? This sphere that women had stepped into? Women did lose this other sphere too, the domestic help lost their earnings, women were routinely fired from jobs despite government directives, and most were deemed to have lived past the prime of their independence and were taken out like rabid dogs to be married to this and that. You fell in the third category.

It erased women from public spaces. From Liberty market, where you had felt so safe. From Bano Bazaar, where you roamed at all hours of the night. There was safety in numbers. You felt safe with these women, even if they thought of you as an alien. To the male gaze, however, you were an organic entity. An extension of the same uterus. The same dupatta. Although, you seldom wore one.

The world turned black, silent. You along with several of your kind, across all classes, were also erased from public memory.

Until again the silence had broken.

So many of you, clones in the eyes of men, or to be accurately put *mombati*. Aurat March. You came on streets, when Noor was silenced, Bijlee too, and Toffe. And now you look at them, these women to whom you look for protection. For Arundhati Roy “There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” But what happens when the ‘voiceless’ start screaming. Do they turn into those *pichal peris*, those ghoulish women, that pull out men’s hearts? The banshees that announce the death of this culture of repression?

To date, more repression has followed.

Some have asserted a post-feminist world.

For you, it is hope.

Accountability.

You have taken steps towards undoing this deliberate silencing of yourself. You write, you read poetry and you talk to women. Across classes, across ethnicities, and across time. You take their stories and you make them your power. You dehyesterize yourself and those around you.

You recently took to wearing an anklet. One with loud bells. That reverberated through the air. Men have looked at you disdainfully. Have told you not to wear it. Some you shut up with a glare, others with your shouting, and yet others with a threat of a sexual harassment case. You know it has long been associated with loose women drawing attention to themselves. But you have taken it upon yourself to own up to those women too, to destroy the demented silences that have long separated moral and immoral women. Women who are marked out for rape and those for sacrifice. The Sinful Women of Kishwar Naheed, Iqra Khilji's Khabees Woman, and Manto's Naked Hens, all an embodiment of the silence smashed to shards upon which patriarchy now bleeds, are what inspire your personal revolt.

So you rage on, your silence is no more finding crevices to eat you from inside. For perhaps your mind has forgotten, but your biology has not. It retains the memory of pain in your hair, which has now stopped growing so as to not be pulled out by another man. And your hands are retaining their softness, longer than your mother's did for they were not condemned to the demented silent meditation of dish washing. And your face has

tanned from going out and being seen, you are no longer as fair as your mother and grandmother. And your hips have not enlarged and your breasts have not sagged from bearing children as an antidote to the silence and loneliness that had eaten away the previous generations.

Because your rage has found a voice. Several voices, really. You are the listener of the stories of women around you and those far away in space and time. You have acquired the language that gives you a voice. You speak poetry and you hear it, dark, ancient, and fresh.

You remember. For generations past, you investigate. For future generations, you record. You correct the mistakes in history, you reject the narratives with no women in them, for this collective silence is no more your burden to carry.

And when you cannot reorder your biology, you reorder the world around you.

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