

A Pakistani Woman Comes of Age

By

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(i) prologue

There are many ways to tell a coming-of-age story but the steps therein usually remain constant: a call-to-greatness, a hero's journey, a conflict, and a relieved maturity. The *bildungsroman* is a thing as stable as Jell-O: it wiggles, but it holds.

The phrase 'coming-of-age' is an amusing one. It seems to position the protagonist as an antagonist to time: before the clock runs out, you must leave your cosy nest, steer through storms of suffering, and arrive at a personal epoch of enlightenment; this means that growth, like birth, is an activity: you kick and scream and wail as the womb contracts. You can't stay here anymore; you must be expelled and newly formed. You must arrive.

But if a hero's journey is the story of birth, then most Pakistani women are encouraged to be forever-foetuses. We're encouraged to never leave the womb, not even when we feel we've grown out of it.

While I was growing up, I felt an odd combination of being both molly-coddled and treated like a criminal. Sometimes I wasn't to leave home because the outside world was too dangerous, and my parents would much rather I be within earshot, safe. Sometimes I wasn't to leave home because the outside world was too weak to handle me and the clerics would much rather I not cause earthquakes, drive men to madness, be an uncontrollable temptress, and bring civilization to its knees.

These contradictory expectations weighed heavily on my body, made me sick, sad, secluded, and let me know quite early on that the adventures of youth were forbidden to me. My emerging woman's body was a problem and authority

figures around me — parents, relatives, school teachers — subjected me to a regime of over-regulation and policing, forbidding mobility, experiments in dress, and freedom of expression; viewing whatever I did via the suspicious lens of sexuality.

This panopticon drove me mad. To escape the consistent surveillance, I ran to the only place I knew my Boomer cops would have a hard time following me into: the internet.

This is that story.

I grew up on the internet. It was there that I found many other young Pakistani women navigating the confusing terrain of modern Muslim womanhood in a world that is increasingly hostile to our presence. We were shaped by the spaces we inhabited, but in turn we also shaped these spaces. We built the support networks we wish we had, as families, community elders, religious leaders, and state officials abandoned us, and in doing so, we inadvertently gave form to much of the modern internet.

Like any great rite-of-passage story, mine begins with falling into a different universe.

(ii) the call: tumblr circa 2014 - 2017

I am fifteen. I am angry. I am online.

In a journal article titled *Feminisms and the Social Media Sphere*, published in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, author Mehreen Kasana writes about the dual bind Pakistani women find themselves in on the blogosphere in its early days, saying

that after she had established herself as a ‘Pakistani blogger’, she found that “non-white voices, particularly Muslim and female, were treated and received as anthropological projects but rarely as sources of personal musings”. Kasana goes on to talk about how non-white women were often silenced online; spoken over by white saviours and attacked by homegrown sexists, these women fight a double battle just to be able to say what they wanted to.

Mehreen Kasana is why I join Tumblr. I follow her there from her satirical pieces in leading Pakistani newspapers. Once I am on the platform, it feels like a godsend: a collection of extremely smart people putting into words the isolation and fury I had felt for so long. The app thrums with life. On my first visit, I spend five hours on there, hopping from blog to blog and reading posts by college-educated social progressives who break down complex theories of race and gender into digestible chunks.

Suddenly, I can speak.

The fury that drove me to chop off my hair with a pair of kitchen scissors because I (a child) was yelled at and implied to be sexually provocative for simply wanting short hair is no longer a private and inexplicable grief. It is a just reaction to “oversexualization” and “the loss of agency”.

The simple desire I have to explore the city without a suspicious chaperone, to have some privacy and freedom from scrutiny in my life, to emerge from under the suffocating spell of surveillance, is no longer a wordless anxiety that dances needles under my epidermis. It is a human need for “autonomy”.

My vague and formless feelings — the ones that keep me up at night — find names. I am fifteen and suddenly I no longer want to die.

I negotiate my way to a shared phone and luck bestows upon me a private laptop. I learn all the tricks of the trade: deleted histories, incognito tabs, keyboard shortcuts. I am simply reading theory, but it feels private, personal, *mine*.

Eventually, I find my tribe. Muslim women on Tumblr lead double lives, but its not as sexy as you imagine. I'm a conservative through and through when it comes down to the fundamentals and I gravitate towards practicing Muslim women — many Pakistani, some Afghan. By day these women deal with Islamophobia and sexism on their main blogs, advocating for the women in their communities, but by night they retreat to secondary secret password protected blogs where they write about their exhaustion with activism, their relationship with faith, their growing dissatisfaction with their communities.

I grow up reading these private musings because I've found my place within the inner sanctum. These women have never met me but my online persona convinces them that I can see these vulnerable parts of them. I carry their secrets like I carry mine. I find a tribe. We shield each other from the prying eyes that follow us everywhere; we let each other speak freely.

I am out of the womb.

Together, we create the resources we need to survive. This is a post 9/11 world and the Woman Question is central to Islamic revival. Everyone is talking about/for/against/with us, and we begin collecting the words we need.

I'll let you in on a secret: every holistic discourse you encounter on the internet in practicing Muslim spaces with regards to women was birthed and nurtured and spread via Tumblr first in the 2010s. You're welcome. It was Tumblr

where Hind Makki started the ‘Side Entrance’ blog that communicated women’s anger at being locked out of Muslim spaces to the world. It was Tumblr where Akram Nadwi’s *Al-Muhaddithat* was first amplified, discussed, and spread. It was Tumblr where female scholars were supported and helped and mainstreamed.

On Tumblr, Muslim women built the modern Islamic internet.

(iii) the conflict: facebook 2017 - 2020

I am eighteen, on the cusp of legal adulthood, and I am sitting at a table. There is table next to my table, and that is where Sara Ahmed sits, where she interrupts her family’s merry-making to point about their problematic comment, and where she is cut up and cut out when she kills joy.

I learn all the wrong lessons.

I am eighteen, and I am sitting at a table. My table is a Facebook post that everyone is ‘liking’. It is a terrible post. I detail why it is a terrible post. I press enter.

There is a problem. I have caused a problem. I am a problem.

Everyone was happy before, content, in agreement. Now, I’ve come and ruined it. But this isn’t Tumblr and these aren’t strangers. I’ve caused problems with/for people I know. These are problems I must carry offline. I am a “killjoy”.

When the older women who made up my tribe on Tumblr grow up and move on from the website to focus on careers and activism and higher education, I migrate to Facebook, but I know I don’t quite fit in. There is no one here who

makes my soul sing — not many on Facebook are talking about theory (yet), and I feel an exhaustion set in because of the constant fights I cannot seem to avoid getting into.

Too many things are happening, or have happened: Qandeel Baloch, Aurat March, the Women’s Protection Bills. I have many opinions, and I hate many opinions. I fiddle with Facebook’s privacy settings; I learn to pick my battles.

I hang out in emerging women’s groups. There is too much trauma here. Pakistani conservatives are fascinated by these groups, convinced they are causing divorces and man-hating and all manner of bad things. There’s a perverse (almost self-Orientalising) fascination with the private lives of Muslim women and there are reports of fake male accounts joining.

I just think the groups are boring.

They do activism-speak as well as everyone on the internet by now — “problematic”, “feminism”, “sexual liberation” — but they rarely put in the work. No-one is building communal resources or encouraging others to read and think.

I take from Facebook lessons in: picking my fights, choosing silence, determining who gets my energy.

I leave.

(iv) the maturity: twitter 2020 - onwards

I’m in my early twenties, and the mincels have taken over Muslim Twitter.

While I was growing up in spaces where how women were treated was a problem to be fixed, there were plenty of Muslim men who were growing up on Reddit threads and secret forums where the *women's movement was a problem*. Now, Muslim incels — ‘mincels’ — are on Twitter, and they want women to know their place.

These men, a lot of them teenage boys, make Twitter exhausting.

They are master provocateurs, deliberately picking out decontextualised Islamic legal rulings, Quranic verses, and Prophetic *ahadith* to make women feel small and powerless. They thrive in the antagonistic environment they create.

bell hooks once wrote about “killing rage” which is a sudden flash of anger so hot and scalding that it makes you want to commit murder at behaviour that draws from oppressive ideologies.

I feel like that on Twitter these days, especially when men attempt to pit my humanity against my love for God. I feel an anger that is so absolute, it scares me with its clear-eyed focus.

But I’m older. I’ve seen this before. I don’t destroy, I organize. I join Twitter Spaces where Muslim women are gathering to do the most powerful thing we can: speak about our own lives. These spaces are regulated. We let in other women and allies. I get to hear stories from Muslim women all over the world — Pakistan, America, England, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Syria — and so much of what they say resonates with me: the feeling over growing up carrying abuse and trauma and the fixed eyes of a dozen people on your back, of carrying the names of friends who didn’t make it, and of having to fight your way to a healthy relationship with your body, your God.

This is where the work is at: Pakistani activists (including Aurat March organizers) and other third world women are reclaiming space on Twitter, shutting out attempts to shut them down and creating new possibilities of existence, furthering the work of so many before them.

And in the midst of this, I find myself, at 26, still online, all grown-up, and still growing.

This is the moment of my birth. I've reached here, kicking and screaming, and you may now congratulate me.

(v) epilogue

I have spent so much of my life lost and angry, but in moments of great lucidity I have found myself, and managed to make incredible friends and allies all over the world. I have open doors and soft couches across the globe should I ever feel the need to visit, even as, in my private and personal life, I've pushed against the truncated and unfair boundaries drawn for me as a Pakistani woman.

This is a story of growing up, that is general, but it is also individual, and it is also national: this is a Pakistani story. The particularities of place and time and the specificities of culture caused me to grow up on the internet in the way I did, caused my own history to be wrapped up so closely (DNA-style) with a history of the online Muslim sphere.

This is a global story, because all Pakistani women's stories are.