

‘Chhoti Aurat’

by

Irta Usman

When the storm rolls in and shakes the palm trees in the most beautiful garden at the most beautiful house on Zafar Ali Road, a little girl runs out in anticipation: it is time for the kiss. She runs towards the ‘A’ (as she calls it) of the posts that hold up the swing set, and locates the small drawing of lips she has carved onto the post. The lips are haphazardly drawn, lop-sided and cartoonish; an eight-year-old’s attempt at the human mouth. She closes her eyes, because you are supposed to, and leans in, because you are supposed to. There is no turning of the head to make way for a partner’s nose, because she does not know that you are supposed to do that yet. The palm trees shake against the gray sky, and the wind blows her little curls into her face. Nobody in the house notices she is gone. Her lips meet the cold mouth of the post, and it smells and tastes like rust. A young girl wanting to learn how to kiss does not yet know that kisses are not supposed to taste like rust, and that love is not as immovable an object as the post of the swingset on Zafar Ali Road. And someone will always notice when a wanting woman is gone.

Many years later, Amma hears the tick of the biological clock before I do. When the marriage question becomes bold and italicized in her mind on the eve of my 21st birthday, I have no way of telling her this story about myself and the swingset, my makeshift mouth. I cannot say to her, *I have always wanted to be a kissed woman before I was a married woman.* There is no language for such a thing in the *rishta*

world. Bodies who want these things cannot and do not make for good purchases once they are 'on the market', and so I relent. The hunt begins.

The *rishta* process is both terribly complicated and yet overwhelmingly simple to me, having been prepared for future wife-hood since childhood, but not prepared enough. Amma has hundreds of thousands of conversations with me on a daily basis about our 'requirements', and in my mind I list the qualities of the men I have wished to be loved by: he must be gentle, he must be kind, he must not smoke, he must not drink, he must have two friends (one best, one less so), he must believe I am the most magnificent creature under the sun, he must listen (really listen), and have nice shoulders, and must know my thoughts before I have thought them, and hold my hand in front of my father - the list is endless. When I share some of the less incriminating of the aforementioned requirements, Amma says *larke order pe nahin bante* (you cannot tailor-make men). A feeling rises like bile and settles in the back of my throat when she reminds me of this, time and time again; denial is impossible to fully swallow, and impossible to vomit out into the shaking hands of my terrified mother. The hunt continues.

It is fruitless to attempt to gauge whether I am an ideal candidate, but I try anyway: 5 '3, curly brown hair, 'wheatish complexion' (as my mother chooses to put it), eyes too large for my face, and a hunger I have been harboring since Zafar Ali

Road. For years I have been telling those who have denied me the love I begged for, ‘Someday, someone will like me very much.’

Of course, the reality of it now was more along the lines of ‘Someday, Amma will like someone for me very much’. I had grieved the reality so deeply that it had made me lose 6 kilograms in 6 months, making me a woman who weighed 39 kilograms at age 22, a skinny, fragile little thing. When they weigh me at the hospital before a gynecologist visit, Amma shrieks at the nurse, hand to her heart. Her horror reverberates through the room and she grabs my arm as she whispers, ‘Men don’t like women who are too thin. Nobody wants an underweight wife!’

On the drive back home, I repeat *nobody wants nobody wants nobody wants* to myself under my breath - Amma has declared that I am not an ideal candidate.

Every night in the WhatsApp group chat, my friends and I begin to swap stories of our experiences in the *rishta* world, and while I tell myself it is an exercise in womanhood and bonding, it increasingly sounds like an ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ meeting (except ours would be called ‘Arranged Marriage Support Group’) where we each take turns going in a circle, confessing the moment of weakness of the day:

‘Hi, my name is Irta, and I am getting arranged-married. Today I begged my friends to let me download Bumble, but they said no.’

‘Hi, my name is Amina, and I am also getting arranged-married. Today I cried for three hours because I was so lonely I thought I might die.’

‘Hi, my name is Kiran, and I too am getting arranged-married. Today I woke up sweating and in a panic because I had a nightmare about one of the hideous men my mother showed me a photo of as a potential candidate for my marriage.’

Inevitably, I have my own share of nightmare-inducing men to put up with. A ‘*rishta* profile’ is a text that contains all the essential information an interested party might need to know in order to pick a spouse for their child, and it is then forwarded across the complex landscape that is Pakistani WhatsApp. It is the *rishta* world equivalent of a resume, with all of them following more or less the same format (which I assume is arranged in order of importance):

Name

Age

Height

Skin Color

Occupation

Caste

Religion

Education

Siblings (and their spouses and occupations)

Size of the house (and whether it is owned or rented)

Requirements (a section that is often absent on a woman's profile and overwhelmingly present on a man's)

It is then accompanied by a carefully curated photograph of the candidate, and with prayers, hopes, and dreams, it is sent off into the WhatsApp universe. Godspeed.

The first time Amma sends me a profile, I am in an Uber on my way back to my hostel from a friend's birthday party. The top I am wearing shows off my collar bones and ends right where my jeans begin, a choice she would disapprove of but one that makes me feel as young as I legally am. I wonder if my husband would like it. Amma tells me she has sent me this profile after much deliberation, and that I should carefully consider it - '*thanday dimaagh ke saath sochna*' (think about it with a cool mind), she tells me.

The first thing I see is his face, and a chill suspends itself in my spine, stays there. Then I see his age - 28. His name is listed as 'xyz', a feeble attempt at anonymity, because when I see his mustache and the look in his eyes, I know exactly who he is: *not* my husband. I am so physically ill at the sight of him that I delete all of Amma's messages and send her a livid '*Appko sharam nahi aati?* (Do you have no

shame?). And then I begin to cry; a pity party has commenced. What had I done to deserve this? What would it take for someone to fall in love with me? To put an end to this bargain that I had become a part of? It is a kick in the stomach and a spit in the face. I am an educated woman, a star student, a winner of arguments and a *raging* feminist, and this is what I have been reduced to: a *rishta* profile, a skin color, the potential wife of a mustachioed man six years my senior. I imagine standing next to him in a photograph at our engagement. I imagine being so close to his face that I can see each pore in each cheek. I imagine looking at him across a room with the knowledge that we share a bed. Then I walk to the bathroom and look myself in the eye - 5'3, curly brown hair, eyes too large for my face, and a hunger that has not been satiated since Zafar Ali Road.

The Arranged Marriage Support Group on WhatsApp attempts to provide comfort at this development in my life, but it is too regular an occurrence in our world to cause much of a stir, and all attempts at comfort are punctuated with the knowledge that one of us surely has it worse than I do. A few days later when a girl we know from school marries her boyfriend of four years, the group chat is alight with joy: love! And its unlikely victory in middle-class Lahore! Maryam had won something we had all coveted and had managed to escape the *rishta* system entirely. She is a deity that day, the goddess of love, and we all *ooh* and *aah* at the Instagram photos she and her lover - now husband (the sweetness of both words meaning the

same thing for her!) - have posted. The sadness descends slowly upon each of us, and I am the first to say '*Kitna achha hota agar koi hamse pyaar karta*' (It would have been so nice if someone had loved us).

This is a daily lament and an unending cause of grief for all of us. We admit it to each other in the late hours of the night, like thieves, like we are stealing something from the great cause of feminism by admitting to choking on loneliness. We are a group of writers, engineers, and businesswomen; fierce, independent, and self-made. During the day we wrinkle noses at any mention of love and nod at our heads with great enthusiasm at the uselessness of men. We pretend love is a cheap thing, we send each other quotes about women being each other's soulmates. There is, after all, a deep humiliation that accompanies such naked need for women who had grown up rolling their eyes at lovers. So we keep our chins up. We delete the nightmare-men from our phones. All lonely women must carry on, and we do.

And then the unthinkable happens: the *rishta* system produces a somewhat suitable match for one of my friends, a bonafide member of the Arranged Marriage Support Group. He is young and educated, tall and with a full head of hair (an anomaly in the arranged marriage market). My friend does not like him, and the negotiations begin. To my complete surprise, we are the ones making the negotiations with her. We begin to list all the *at least's* we can think of:

At least he is not 30

At least he is not bald

At least he is educated (A Master's student!)

At least he has good grammar

At least he cares about women having basic human rights

At least he's not *too* ugly.

We tell her all good marriages are built on the solid foundation of a good list of *at least's*. The truth was that the *rishta* system is an economy that runs entirely on the inexhaustible fuel of women's fear of being left unwanted, and we were scared. We did not want to invite God's wrath by denying the very non-ugly blessing he had sent to our doorstep. A woman who says no is a woman who ends up alone, and our love for each other did not allow us to encourage such rash decisions, feminism be damned.

One night, during the daily negotiations, I jokingly refer to the blessed man as her 'future husband', and she responds by saying, '*Chhoti aurat hai tu* (You are a small woman)'. It is meant as a friendly insult, and I enjoy it immensely. I am indeed a *chhoti aurat* - I have never felt smaller in my life. Or more disgusting. Or more needy. Or more terrified. As a negotiator I am immaculate, a lawyer in the making and the mouthpiece for all future blessings to be sent our way. My friends' mothers begin to

count on me to make exorbitant cases for their *atleast's*, and I am a small woman cut out for the large job. As a friend, however, I feel that I am failing them. As a feminist, even more so. I tell them marriage is not about love, that we have been wrong all along. Marriage is bigger than these words and this flimsy language. Love simply does not happen to people like us. It did not reach our corner of Lahore, and we must *sabar shukar* and take what we get. All lonely women must carry on, and we do.

When I am not negotiating and gesticulating about the futility of the forever's that love promises us, I am writing poems and speeches about the crushing weight of my need. When my mother brings up another xyz, I imagine swallowing my poems until they fill my stomach and protrude from my neck in strange, comical ways. I imagine my stomach becoming an archive of unfulfilled wishes and my unloved thoughts.

But I am a relentlessly, disgustingly hopeful creature, and I refuse to fall victim to despair. So I become a *chhoti aurat* in constant preparation as I begin to tell myself that every small shortcoming and change in my life signifies the arrival of my anti-*at least*. I lose a friend and I tell myself I had to lose them in order for him to come. I cut my hair and believe wholeheartedly that this is the haircut he will love me in. I make an achievement and celebrate it because surely, *surely*, this is the achievement after which he will become cause for celebration. I tell no one of my preparations, and in

the mirror before my showers I see them laid out on my skin like invisible tattoos. All
lonely women must carry on, but I don't.

Copyright © Irta Usman 2024. All rights reserved.