

A Seat at Bibi's  
Dining Table

By

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My femininity is a fickle thing, always in flux. It can largely be reduced to a set of shifting aesthetics, something to be learned and unlearned. There are only three people who have had an abiding influence on my femininity, and my person at large: my grandmother, my aunt, and my mother. Each has provided me with their unique blueprint for what it means to be a woman, for what it means to be a Pakistani woman. When my grandmother died earlier this year, I felt untethered. But I do not feel disconnected from my grandmother; in fact, I feel her presence everywhere. I see her in flowers, chocolate milkshakes and raised eyebrows. I hear her in chides, secrets and shrieks. Instead, I felt (and still feel) lost to myself. I look to my mother and aunt, both of whom are sitting deep in their grief, and wonder who I would be without these women. Everything I am is defined either in affinity or opposition to them. But this is not a love letter. I write to capture the circumstances and characters of these three women, so that I better understand who I am and what I have inherited.

My grandmother was the nucleus of our family, and we all sought her approval. Everyone, even her children and grandchildren, called her 'Bibi', because she was our matriarch. Bibi had a list of things that she liked (her family, her garden, and her jewellery), and the things that she did not (incompetence, messiness, and tight clothes). Whereas I was encouraged to not to be materialistic or vain, and to search for charm within a person's character, Bibi relished aesthetic beauty like a fine wine. She could recount in detail the delightful features of a fleeting acquaintance from many years ago. She particularly revelled in my grandfather's handsome stature, and I suspect this soothed many problems in their marriage. They were the perfect picture couple. In my particularly dark moments, I wonder whether my grandmother would have loved me less if I had not won a genetic lottery. If I didn't have thick hair, almond eyes, and light skin, would she still have cared for me? The problem with a question like this is that people will deny it even if it is true. I have a very dear childhood friend who far excels me in intellect, but more than that she is kind, and her presence brings comfort to any room she walks into. Bibi always pitied her for her failure to match the archaic, boring beauty

standards which define South Asian femininity. I defended my friend by fighting beauty with brains: ‘but Bibi, she’s very clever, far cleverer than me!’ Bibi raised an eyebrow and smirked: ‘of course beta, God compensates.’ According to Bibi’s rulebook, beauty trumps all else, each and every time.

Bibi lived for joy, and she was indiscriminate in her enjoyment of experiences. A single flower from her garden could bring her as much pleasure as a delicious meal. Despite my best efforts, a significant portion of my joy is derived from achievement. If I don’t secure a job or get high marks in an exam, it does not matter how delicious a late afternoon ice cream is, everything around me is rendered bleak and dull. Bibi, on the other hand, did not let anything rob her of her delight. It was not that she was naive, or a stranger to hardship. She just understood that pleasure is an important form of knowledge, and she embodied this truth fully. Even as she was approaching her death, and she had been afflicted by a string of merciless illnesses, she found moments of bliss and held them close. She had grown tired of the sponge baths her nurse would give her, and one day she asked for a proper shower. By then, her legs had swollen, and it took three people to deliver her into the shower and then back to her bed. But when she lay back down, wrapped in her towelling robe, skin still damp from the warm water, she sighed in satisfaction at the knowledge that she was fully clean. There are many things that I valued about my grandmother, but her ability to create light in the deepest dark is probably what I hold in highest regard.

Bibi held power over all of us. Her dining table was where we convened as a family. It was where we exchanged food and established our group dynamics. I am one of the youngest in my family and I only know that table as a place of comfort. But Bibi could also be unforgiving and in the past that dining table was also a site of conflicts central to my family’s identity. With Bibi on one side and her children on the other, they fought over work, duty, and love. I often think of my aunt as a product of these battles, like some kind of Greek goddess, forged of the fight. She enters each room like a

season: she flings open the door and storms in, draped in multicoloured shawls and doused in perfume. Her pouty lips are carefully painted red and her eyes are concealed behind large, black sunglasses. My aunt does not speak to you, she addresses you, she is perpetually centre-stage, and you are her audience.

My aunt has been fighting for a better Pakistan for the better part of her life. Many of her contemporaries threw in the towel years ago, moved to America to spend their days talking, thinking, and writing about Pakistan. But my aunt is different: she finds it hard to tolerate Pakistan, but it is harder to imagine her living anywhere else. To make herself heard, to occupy space in smoky rooms full of men, she has embodied a ferocious femininity. If my grandma was the nucleus of our family, then my aunt is the glue. If you are hungry, you will receive a banquet. If you are ill, you will be visited by every doctor in town. In my aunt's world, there is no problem that cannot be solved by an iron will, determination or a phone call. But everything in her world is also framed in terms of the fight, the struggle, the resistance. My aunt does not know rest, for everything in her vicinity is about to implode and she alone must stop it. By the time Bibi had died, she and my aunt had reconciled over every fight that they had ever had. But sitting at Bibi's dining table, I do not think my aunt ever believed that she was enough. Every conversation with her is an opportunity for political education and inspiration, and her every decision is in service of others. I just wish that she had taken the time to save herself (from the pain, from the exhaustion, from the frustration) in the midst of it all.

Like many members of my family, I have grown up in my aunt's shadow. But perhaps I feel this more because we share a close physical likeness. This feels like a cruel joke because while we may share facial features, I lack her mental fortitude. Every year since I was a little girl, my aunt has reminded me in every birthday card that it is my duty to return 'home' to help my 'nation'. I was raised in Britain, but from childhood to adolescence, I would faithfully pledge my allegiance to Pakistan, and my aunt is the

reason why. Today as an adult, I have detached myself from close affiliation to either country, despite her best efforts. But like my aunt, I seek to live my life in service of others. There have been many times when I too have wanted to throw in the towel and look to fruitful pursuits outside the realm of activism. Frequently I am paralysed by anger and sadness but then I think about my aunt and all the times that she has carried on despite the ceaseless fires that have raged around her. Sometimes I feel sad that I do not see her as vulnerable. She is not my aunt: she is my hero, and you are not allowed to confide in your heroes. But my aunt taught me how to fight and for that, I am eternally grateful.

And then there is my mother. How do I write about my mother? My mother is everything I wish that I could be. They say that as you get older, your parents reveal themselves to be flawed humans, and not the gods of your childhood. I have tried and tried and tried to rid myself of my mother's hold. But the truth is that there is nobody whose approval I seek more. She can break my heart in more profound ways than any lover ever could.

I think this can be attributed to the fact that I am very aware of my mother's sacrifice: she left her family and her country so that she could raise her family in Britain. This was her choice, but I sometimes question whether she believes it was worth it. Pakistan is at the centre of her intellectual imagination, and I think her physical detachment makes her feel incomplete. Maybe this is why she made such an active effort to keep Pakistan alive in our home. Through language, music, and food, she offered her homeland to us. My life is infinitely richer and heavier for each colour and flavour my mother introduced to me. Urdu, in particular, is her greatest gift to me. No matter how far away from home I travel, when I inevitably catch a stranger's conversation in Urdu, I feel a sense of intimate safety.

There is no place for candour in the British cultural code. Conversations can be sarcastic and dripping in irony, but they are never straightforward. Sentences are punctuated by 'I'm sorry,' as if the very act of existence poses a major public inconvenience. But my mother tells it like it is and she does not care if that hurts your feelings. A few days after Bibi passed away, the two of us were heading to a prayer service for her. We were standing in an elevator, and my mother turned towards me and cast her eyes over my face. I thought she was scanning my face for some likeness with my grandmother, perhaps she was going to comment fondly on my pointed chin inherited from Bibi. Instead, she said, 'you need to thread your upper lip, you look like Hitler'. And with that she strode out of the lift, leaving me reeling. My mother's humour is like a candy that fizzles, pops, and bursts on your tongue, you are never quite sure if the sensation is a pleasant one, but you are always left wanting more. But from her, I learned how to use humour like a weapon, to disarm an opponent with a perfectly timed punched line. Nothing has hold over her because everything can be reduced to a joke. Whilst Bibi and my aunt dominated the dining table, and speaking in a language of extremes, my mother sharpened her wit from the side-lines.

From each of these women, my women, I have done everything to distinguish myself. I have cultivated strange passions, chased the wrong boys, gotten tattoos, lost weight and then gained it back. I have tried to say you have no power over me. But every time I falter and turn back to them. I do not know how to do my womanhood without them. My femininity, in all its horror and splendour, is what they have passed on to me. My cousin's husband once jokingly referred to them as 'the witches'. But there is truth in every joke, and as a trio they inspire both awe and fear. I can try to draw boundaries between us, but it is like drawing lines on the beach: sooner or later the sea will wash everything away and leave no distinguishing marks in the sand. Together my grandmother, aunt, and mother, are my making, my breaking, and my inevitable, all at once.