

## JULIETS ARE SPEAKING UP

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Another March 8, another women's day. Time to focus again on the injustices that half the world's population faces because of being born female. This day also provides a benchmark to look back and celebrate how far women have come. But all this is not just about women. What women suffer, and what women achieve, has to be looked at in the socio-political context in which they live.

Gender injustices are as much about class and power struggles, about economic policies that continue to increase the gap between rich and poor, about inherent racism and prejudices. Among the marginalised sections of society, women are further marginalised. Where there are class and economic inequities, it is women who suffer the most. And when there are wars and violent conflicts—initiated, it must be said, almost exclusively by men—it is women who bear the brunt. Of the over 31 million people displaced by violent conflicts around the world, most are women and children. Often, women's bodies are the battleground over which men satisfy their lust for revenge and to bring 'the enemy' down. This is not just the case during full-scale wars and violent conflicts. It is also the norm in patriarchal societies where rape for revenge is common, when a woman is targeted in order to teach the men of her family a lesson. Mukhtiar Mai in Meerwala village near Multan in Pakistan is only one example of paying the price for a supposed transgression by her brother.

In actual fact, the men who assaulted her had first sexually assaulted her younger brother Shakoor, about 14 years old in 2002 when the incident took place. When it appeared that he would not remain quiet about the assault, his assailants sought to protect themselves by accusing him of having an affair with their sister.

The politics of caste and class figure prominently in this saga as they tend to do in other such cases. Mukhtiar Mai's family belongs to the lowest social rungs in the village. Their opponents, who belong to a 'higher' social class, convened a village council to settle the matter and said that they would 'do to Shakoor's sister' what he had allegedly done to their's. Those present tried to convince them otherwise. According to Abdur Razzaq, the village maulvi, whom this writer talked to in 2006 while making a documentary on the issue, "We said that would be wrong. Instead, one of them should marry Mukhtiar (a divorcee) and Shakoor should marry their sister". This kind of watta-satta arrangement is common in the area.

When they insisted they would dishonour Mukhtiar, he says, he left along with other villagers. Some stayed back at the site of the meeting, across the field from Mukhtiar's house. The men appeared to agree that Mukhtiar should come to them and ask pardon for this 'crime'. When her uncle escorted her out of her parents' home for this purpose, the young men, who were armed, seized her and dragged her into a room in front of all those present. No one dared step in.

Rape itself was and remains common. As Maulvi Razzak said, "It happens. Two or three bad boys will sneak into someone's house and commit an excess ('ziadati', as most people commonly refer to rape). But this was really bad."

What he meant was that while rape was commonplace, the way that it happened with Mukhtiar could not be countenanced. He said that he heard about the incident a few days later. That Friday, he spoke against it in his sermon. A local journalist who was present took up the matter. Their intervention kept Mukhtiar from committing suicide as she says she felt driven to do. Instead, she registered a report with the nearest police station, at the next village. It is also a sign of the changing times that other villagers supported Mukhtiar, enabling her to remain in the village, which doesn't happen usually after such a public disgrace.

Remember Nawabpur in the early 1980s, the first such case to come to media attention, where a carpenter was accused (like Mukhtiar's brother) of dallying with a woman from a higher-caste family. The men of that family beat him so severely that he died. They stripped the women and paraded them in the streets—made them 'dance naked' as news reports put it. The family subsequently left the village, unable to bear the shame. Many similar cases have taken place.

A major difference in Mukhtiar's case is that the opposing family did not kill her brother when they accused him. Secondly, she received enough local support to be able to survive in her own home (the government also provided her with 24-hour protection, even building a police station across the street from her house). Thirdly, she had the innate courage and wisdom to focus not on herself, but on others. In the process, she has polished herself, gained self-confidence, learnt to read and write (at her own school), and gained an international profile.

It began when she used the 'compensation' cheque provided by the government to buy land on which to build a school—the first in the village. Inspired by her courage and also driven by their own need to earn income, young women from nearby villages come and teach there. One teacher, Parveen, said that she used to walk an hour from Waduwalla village where she lives to Meerwala and back, until Mukhtiar Mai bought an ambulance van that doubles as a school bus, picking up and dropping students and teachers.

"I realised that those who supported me were the educated people," said Mukhtiar, explaining why she felt education was so important. "Before this, women had no other options but to work in the fields."

Yet, despite all the international and national support and sympathy Mukhtiar has generated, her rapists have still not been punished, nearly seven years later.

Her story reflects the changes taking place in Pakistani society as well as all that remains stagnant within it. On the one hand, there is an increasing refusal to accept injustice. Unable to countenance this defiance, those perpetuating the injustice respond with greater brutality for which they are now well armed, thanks to the great Afghan 'jihad' of the 1980s that introduced an influx of arms and ammunition into Pakistani society.

Women are speaking out all over the country, attempting to exercise their rights to personal autonomy— education, choice of life partner, employment. Those who acquiesce to their family's wishes at the expense of their own aspirations fade quietly into the sunset. Those who refuse now make media headlines not for their acts of defiance, but when their families respond with violence. For all those embroiled in such high-profile dramas, many others get

away with it—their families reluctantly accept their choices or 'merely' ostracise them. This does not make the news.

In most cases, the more civilised responses either come from those too poor to have an 'honour' front to keep up or the better educated. The British columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, whose family migrated from India to Uganda where she was born, relates how her father never spoke to her again because she defied his wishes to act (Juliet) in an English play while in school, back in 1965.

Writing about the relevance of Shakespeare to people of various backgrounds around the world she comments, "South Asians and Arabs and their diasporic peoples are Elizabethan still. In their world, children are parental possessions, marriages arranged, personal autonomy frowned upon. Strong women like Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* or Katherine the shrew must be tamed. Countless Juliets are bullied, beaten, even killed if they refuse to be despatched to a chosen bridegroom."

Today, more and more Juliets are speaking up, not only in Pakistan but around the world. Somehow, somewhere, this will make a difference. It gives cause for hope even as the marginalised despair about those who continue to insist on dragging them back into the Middle Ages. □□□