

Faces of oppression

Asma Barlas

In light of such practices as throwing acid on women's faces, raping them, or stripping them naked publicly, and even killing them—all as a way to avenge male “honor”—it is easy to tolerate, and even to extol, the other less heinous, but no less problematic, aspects of women's oppression and degradation in Pakistan. One of these, which is lauded as signaling great respect for women, is the practice of bestowing public office, but no real power, on the widows and daughters of charismatic leaders who have died or been killed. Hence, the rush to elect women from certain families, who have no political credentials, to leadership positions in political parties as well as the state. (This happens not only in Pakistan, but also in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, among others.)

To many people, the election of women to high public office in “traditional” societies is evidence of an incipient democracy and modernity; to a naive few, it even suggests a measure of women's empowerment. Truthfully, however, the election of women as “leaders” is a function of a patriarchal view of women as having no identity of their own and serving only as symbolic proxies of men. Consequently, people who are baffled by the fact that women can be elected heads of government in societies notorious for their misogyny, fail to realize that there is no contradiction between oppressing women and putting some of them on display as symbolic “leaders.” The same ideologies are at work in the ritualized rape/killing/abuse of women and in their re-presentation as surrogates of dead men; indeed, these are two ends of the same spectrum of women's objectification.

Having written earlier about one end of this spectrum, I want to focus today on the other: the search for an appropriate female heir for the late Z.A. Bhutto, specially in the absence of the First Daughter, Benazir, from the country on self-imposed exile.

According to Salman Hussein (*The Friday Times*, July 26), the illness of Bhutto's widow, Nusrat, has opened up her seat for contestation in the upcoming elections and rumor has it that Sanam—listed as the “only other surviving child of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto” (one would think Nusrat had nothing to do with her birth!)—might be a contender for this seat. Pundits believe that this other Ms. Bhutto is eminently “qualified to throw her hat in the political ring [because she] graduated from Harvard and has been a model citizen” and because, like Benazir, she may be unable to avoid having the “political mantle . . . thrust upon her.” Speaking candidly, however, a PPP boss admits that a “fresh Bhutto face will spruce things up.” (Hussein observes that Ghinwa, the widow of Bhutto's son, Murtaza, has failed to exert the sort of public pull that Sanam is expected to.)

A degree from Harvard and a record of model citizenship might make Sanam a fitting contender for elections, but it isn't her degree or exemplary behavior that people view as being important; rather, as Hussein's article makes clear, it is the fact that she has the name and face of a Bhutto. As such, even if she doesn't live in Pakistan and has little or no understanding of the political scene there (or interest in it), the “political mantle” is expected to fall on her, as if she were next in line to the throne in a hereditary kingship

rather than a possible candidate for elections in a “democracy.” (Of course, even in India, Sonia Gandhi was able to carve out political space for herself on the same grounds as the “Bhutto women” in Pakistan: that she is the widow of a “martyr,” martyrdom consisting of being killed not while defending the country, but for an assortment of other reasons.)

That people continue to think of politics in such feudal terms reveals the extent to which family pedigree and connections, rather than credentials or merit, determine one’s future in a country where the political mantle is inherited usually by sons, even those who may only be a few IQ points away from being brain-dead. Hence the perennial circulation of vacuous elites in a system that is dignified by being labeled a “democracy.” But whereas this process, though degrading to the country, does not objectify men, it clearly does the women who participate in it. Hence, the widow and daughter based politics may give some women the illusion of power, and the people who vote for them the illusion of being open-minded, but it is part and parcel of the process of objectifying women.

It may be in the very nature of patriarchy (whether religious or secular) to reduce women into objects, or, conversely, to valorize identity-less women. Consider the unrelenting condemnation of the ambitious Hillary Clinton and the embrace of the self-effacing Laura Bush in the US. And yet, as the cliché goes, for a woman to succeed in a “man’s world,” she has to become one of the “boys,” as Mrs. Clinton is willing to do. Such “sex-change metaphors” encode a quite ancient misogyny. For instance, the Greeks defined women as lesser men, and many medieval Christians and Muslims could only accommodate the phenomenon of women’s piety by re-presenting such women as having “become male.”

Making men the measure of all value, while reducing women to objects, defines the very core of sexual oppression and patriarchal power and what makes this tendency particularly insufferable among Muslims is that it runs counter to the teachings of the Qur’an which tell us that God created humans from the same *nafs* (person). There can be no clearer evidence of the ontological nature of sexual equality in Islam than this. But, who will listen to such a message in a savagely inegalitarian society in which men kill, rape, and mutilate women in defense of their “honor” and most people condone it on the grounds that “boys will be boys?” One then is left to wonder if the boys will ever grow up, why women have to pay the price for their infantilism, and why we vilify Islam for the peculiarly male pathologies that lead most men to oppress and demean women.