

## Losing My Religion

I sat by the window, or at least that is what they called it. It was a crack in the wall a few feet above my head and let in a shaft of light, almost like a blessing in disguise in the otherwise musty, dark room. The smallest protest or complaint that escaped my lips was met with a quick retort - "What more do you expect from prison?" The accusatory tone rang in my head much after the last words had been uttered and forgotten. I was the woman who brought shame and misery. I was the wife no husband would like to flaunt. I was the mother who did more harm than good to her children. I was the relative no one wanted to own up to, the friend everyone wished they never knew.

Many, many years before I found myself holed up in this dungeon, I knew only a life of sunshine and happiness. My world was filled with rainbows and butterflies, all those fantasies that make up every little girl's dreams. With three sisters just a little older than I and brothers who played the role of distant male relatives, I had not a care in the world and spent many a day frolicking amongst the flowers only to take a break when the little stream beckoned me to wet my maiden feet. The vivid yellows and soft violets, the bright oranges and the fresh greens – never again have I come across some of the colours I got so acquainted to as a girl running in the fields.

Even though my culture was conservative and my family traditional, I occupied the precious position of the youngest girl. While my brothers were out battling the demons in the real world and bringing home the bread, my sisters were busy sweeping and swapping, fetching water and keeping the fire going. I, on the other hand, was left to myself, to do as I pleased as long as I was clean, presentable and in good humour as mealtimes approached. My parents played an integral, though not altogether active, role in my life. Being the youngest of their children, they were both well into their old age before I came along. My mother, suffering from what we now know to be arthritis, was called Creaky and Bow-legs by the neighbourhood bullies every time she ventured out. Even today, when I close my eyes, I can only see an old, frail woman, dressed in a tattered, traditional white robe, slumped over herself in a corner. My father was the local teacher, a revered man of rare wisdom who could make sense of the mysterious squiggles that covered the pages of the local papers. He was the one source of information for our hamlet, our one connection with the outside world. Being from the heartland of a nation stricken with poverty, the joys of electricity and literacy were not things that the average man aspired for.

One of my most vivid childhood memories is of the day when my father decided to change the destiny of our hamlet. Declaring that knowledge for one is knowledge for none and wisdom was meant to be partaken of, he began to educate young boys from the streets surrounding our little hut on how to make sense of those lines and curves that would haunt them for a large part of their lives. Girls were obviously not granted admission to such sessions of learning. I begged, beseeched and pleaded. I threw a fit, refused to eat and feigned illness. Nothing I did could shake generations of values that were ingrained into their systems. "The place of a traditional Muslim girl is by the fire" they said before going on to lament how they should have imposed more rules and reined me in while they still could. "Now it is too late. Now she has gone astray and embraced the wayward path. Who will

marry her now?" they moaned. Soon it became too much for me to handle, being the seven-year-old that I was, and I gave it up as a lost cause.

A few months later, a brainwave hit me, a moment of epiphany rushed through my being and in hindsight, I have come to understand that that one minute moulded my entire personality, shaped my whole value system and made me who I am today – Fazila Begum, the Shame and the Shamed, the Conquered and the Conqueror. A distant relative had come to visit, one of those uncles who needed to be appeased on grounds of age and experience but never any true respect or love. While my father was being the courteous, subservient host that he was, my mother was playing the role of a demure Muslim wife to perfection. Hidden behind an almost opaque veil to protect her dignity and pride, she made some basic enquiries as to his health and family before retreating to her rightful place by the fire. As for me, I was just by the door, out of sight but still seeing. It was then that it hit me – why could I not use my customs to my advantage? My father had started worrying about my “rebellious” ways and “Western” ideals. He was constantly hinting at how I must be more docile and accepting, less fickle and flighty. This was my chance to embrace the veil and transform myself into the perfect Muslim daughter. What he would never know is why I changed my mind so suddenly. Neither the angels did not whisper sense into my head nor did my siblings succeed in convincing me. To me, the undecipherable squiggles on the piece of paper my father taught from had the irresistible charm of the unattainable. From behind the veil, I could listen to his classes undisturbed. That was what I began to do, almost every day until I could read better than any of the boys within a mile of our hut.

I grew older and began to spend more and more time pursuing hobbies that were “unfit” for a woman. My sisters did not let me wrap the vegetables because I wasted time reading the paper we wrapped them in. They did not let me visit the market because I idled away time reading posters along the way. They did not let me take care of the few chicken and goats that we had because I began practicing simple arithmetic with them, another trick that I had mastered over time. All in all, I was becoming too much of a burden on the poor, hardworking folk that I called family.

As the sun rose on the ninth day after my sixteenth birthday, a strange motley group of people approached our humble porch. I quickly went scurrying on, not armed with appropriately modest clothing as I was not expecting guests. About a half an hour of torturous self-imposed exile in my room later, my father called out for me. Using an endearment that had come to substitute my name, his voice nevertheless had a tone of authority, of command that I would not dare to question. I entered timidly and approached my father, my eyes set firmly at his toes. “This, child, is Salim Sahib. He is forty years old and a good man”, my father introduced. All at once, tears pooled in my eyes and my head spun a full circle. The reality of my situation came crashing over me. There was no escape. The generations of rules, regulations and customs had finally caught up with me, the pampered youngest child. A fortnight from then, I was decked in traditional bridal finery, or the closest that we could afford, and went through the ceremonies that made me someone else’s responsibility. That night, my parents must have finally slept in peace. With all their daughters successfully married away and their sons fending for themselves, they were finally rid of worldly duties and could embrace Allah wholeheartedly.

My husband was a failed trader from the next village. Twenty years had passed since he began trying his hand out at business and all he had to show for it was the tidbits of stock that lay strewn around his two bedroom house. That first night, his home looked like a palace to me. Soon, I understood that one room was out of bounds for me and I was never to be seen around company so it wasn't much bigger than from where I came. Life there was different from my childhood. I now had duties and responsibilities to other people. I had to be conscious of the repercussions of my actions. I was scared, terrified.

The only thing I had brought with me from home was my battered copy of the Koran. The gold thread was unravelling itself from the bind and the cover was definitely not stain free but it was mine. It had more memories attached to it than anything else I owned as it reminded me of home. It gave me immense satisfaction in reading it because it represented everything I had fought for, everything I had become.

By twenty, I was a mother, a wife and a dutiful daughter-in-law. More importantly though, I had grown into my own. I had formed my theories of the world and had a clear understanding of what role I was meant to play in this lifetime. I kept at my reading, despite incessant warnings against it by my mother-in-law. One day, I even began teaching my neighbour's daughter the alphabet. It was July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1987.

That was the day the violence began. I remember it as clear as if it were yesterday. He stormed into my room and caught me unawares, reading a wayward page of a magazine. He caught my hand, dragged me to the floor and flogged me with his leather belt, his most prized possession.

That was the day I decided. I pulled myself together and vowed to end this life of fear, abuse and oppression. Every time my heart threatened to give in to social expectation, all I needed to do was look at my scars and remind myself that if I stayed, my daughter would never know the joy of the alphabet, the satisfaction of seeing method in madness in the print.

That was also the day I gave up on my God. From that day on, my prized Koran ceased to be a symbol of my faith but was relegated to the position of a souvenir from my childhood, a representation of what my life at home used to be. From then on, every time I see the Koran, I feel a connection not with God but with the freedom I used to enjoy as a girl.

With this divorce of faith, I came to terms with what is perhaps the most important realisation of my life. An identity was thrust upon me. I was made to slip into shoes that bit my feet and become someone I was not. The price I paid for being socially accepted was my religion. Becoming a Muslim wife meant losing the Islamic voice inside me. I began to staunchly believe that if there was a God, he would stand for gender equality and women's empowerment. If He truly loved us all, He would not watch as one segment of society got walked upon by the stronger, the more powerful. Today, as a much older woman, I understand that such thoughts were well ahead of their times but on that day, my blood was boiling with rage and there was nowhere to go, no one to turn to.

From that day, I began saving. I would slip in a coin here, a couple there and if I was in a particularly courageous mood, I would even slip out a note from the many that were stuffed

into my husband's wallet. Around that time, his trade was finally picking up (or so he claimed) and his pockets were well lined. Over the course of the next two years, I stashed more and more cash and began formulating a plan. Where I would go and what I would do, I knew not. All I was sure of was that those walls would be the end of me, that I would suffocate and die if I stayed long enough. We did not, thankfully, have any more children. My husband took on a younger, more beautiful wife and I was left to care for our daughter. I had failed to bear him a son and hence, I was not useful to him any longer.

It was the night of July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1990 that I chose to make my grand escape. It almost seemed like the right thing to do, a token to silent thanks for the day that changed my life. Though no one particularly heard me, I feigned a disabling headache (overused yet effective) and headed to the confines of my room, where I lay in wait for the others to go to sleep. My daughter, unaware of the drastic change that she would have to experience, settled down on my bed and promptly fell asleep. Late in the night, I stole away, dressed for the first time in a burkha out of free will. It acted as the perfect disguise and made sure that I would not face any untoward situations after the sun rose.

What happened thereon is as surreal as a dream. All my planning amounted to nothing. As I walked down our street, the neighbour's girl who I had taught happened to be out with her father, recognized my daughter and rushed at us with childish enthusiasm. The father, already convinced of my madness thanks to my obsessive need to educate girls around me, sensed something was amiss and called out to my husband. I was dragged unceremoniously back home and have not seen outside this room ever since. I am told my daughter is being looked after well by the younger wife but it pains me to not see her grow up.

They call me crazy now, deranged and mad. They say I became like this because I stopped believing in Allah and the power of *namaz*. They do not understand and they never will. They stripped me of my freedom, my individuality, and my confidence. They took my religion away from me, turned me against my God. Today, all I have left is the belief that this too shall pass and that I shall emerge stronger. The room is musty and dark and my thoughts are clouded by emotion. The only other thing in the room is a tattered Koran. I am not in prison. I am in my husband's house but often, I do not know the difference. I lost my religion but I built myself an identity. I am one of the lucky few.

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