

Devouring the Chauvinism

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“When do you think you can behave as every other Indian girl does?” Payal could hear her mother scream at top of her voice. By now Payal has gathered up all her experiences much enough to know how things are going to line up between her and her mother. “You’re almost hitting your mid-twenties now still thinking that you can goof around with your wayward friends and bully others.” Payal comes out from her room, pretending to look for something urgent. Apparently, she is trying to avoid an eye contact with her mother. “Maa, have you seen a maroon diary I had kept right beside the T.V. I have to return it to Sara. She has been asking it for days now.” “Do you think you can give me that i-am-so-studious attitude and get away from my questions? Shanti was complaining that you made her nephew trip and fall on his face.” Shanti aunty, their neighbour, can never find peace on Himalayas as she finds bickering over petty things around her. She never leaves a chance to taunt Payal and her family and lives the moment to the fullest. But this time it’s Payal. She intentionally made him fall over his face hoping this would break his nose bone into pieces. Just when Payal goes to grab a bite from the juicy green apple, the last one in the packet which her mother had bought from supermarket 3 days before, her mother rushes towards her, snatches the apple from her hand and demands a neat explanation. Understanding that there’s no way to escape to mother’s wrath, Payal turns to make an eye contact with her and says, “Maa, you know Sandeep irks the hell out of me. He was scoffing at Sara and was calling her names, since she broke up with him. And so, I decided to maltreat him in front of his friends. But why do you think I keep bullying people around? There’s a thick line between bullying and showing them right path and I do the latter for a right cause.” Payal was feeling proud enough pondering over the neat explanation of her righteous deed.

“There was no need to get into other’s fight, especially when your friend Sara has messed up her life as well as Sandeep’s. She always needed that attention from boys and be popular among friends. Today’s generation thinks that such things will make their lives happening enough for others to get dazzled towards. What they do not understand is this will affect their future a big time. Which decent man is going to take Sara’s hand considering her past records?”

Payal's mother never fails to astonish her, but this was something she could not bear with. "Past records' did you say? You are making her sound like a criminal, like a robber who just stole one of Picasso's paintings. She trusted Sandeep more than herself and he kept betraying her the whole time avoiding her phone calls and her messages. He deserved it right. Sara is now smart enough to choose a 'decent man' for herself who would be less judgemental regarding her 'past records' and accept her the way she is." Quoting her mother's words is something Payal often fears to commit since this is definitely a bigger crime than stealing Picasso's painting from Barcelona Museum. But when it comes to justifying the ways of the world where a woman also plays a major role, she leaves no stone unturned to empower a woman. "Anyway, I understand that you never liked whatever I did since I was a child and I suppose it will be futile to argue over something I do not regret doing. Moreover, I need to prepare myself for the big day tomorrow, if that concerns you." Payal knows her mother never gets satisfied or even bothers to care about her field of interest. But somewhere deep inside Payal was expecting at least a smile since this is going to be a life changer. "What big day are you talking about?" Her mother's raised her right eyebrow with question. "I got a job at a Production house as an assistant producer. They are working on a new project and everyone believes that this new project, which is a Sci-fi movie, is going to be a huge success in Bollywood industry. I am glad I could make it from the very beginning. They will train me for first few months and then I get a permanent position in the house. After gaining enough expertise from here, I might get a chance to work for the leading production houses of Hollywood." Payal had gone into trance while describing her dreams hopefully. Just then her mother snapped at her and brought her back to the reality. "You call it a job? Never in my life had I thought my daughter would step into the fake world of glamour. It would have been much better if you had studied home science. You can at least cook food and feed your husband. He will let you stay with him if cook good food if not for your indiscipline attitude towards our culture. This page3 life will devour you someday as this career is not for the middle class families like us. You should....." Payal released a heavy sigh and walked towards her room, turning a deaf ear to rest of her mother's lecture.

In the morning, Payal comes out to the hall, wearing a bath robe with dripping hair. "Maa, will you iron my purple shirt? I do not want to get late on my first day. I need to dry my hair and re-arrange some of my documents." Her mother's silence gave her an answer. She rushed back to her room hurriedly and plugged the iron into its sockets. While the iron was preparing itself, she was rubbing the towel to her hair. Soon after finishing, she comes to see if her mother has cooked her any breakfast. She finds a plate of hot poha on the dining table. As she was taking a spoon of poha, her mother comes her behind and startles her. "I see you have decided to go against my wishes in every way I want." "Maa, you need to believe that film is only I ever wanted for. You should be happy for me that I finally got something I wanted for years" To this her mother replied, "Even your elder brother wanted to do something exciting in his life and you know what price he had to pay for it. Moreover, you are a girl. You ought not to cross your radius." Payal never thought this would be coming from her at this point of time. She decided to head out with an empty stomach.

Just when she was going to start her scooty, “My little sister is an assistant producer now, eh.” Payal smiles to herself. She knew her brother will meet her on her important day even if he dares not to go in front of her mother. “Mother is still mad at me I suppose.” “Please bhai, you often meet me, but for once you must meet maa as well. I am sure she’ll forget everything once she sees you in front of her.” “It’s just not simple. After whatever I did, I don’t think I can gather enough guts to show my face to her. Anyway, you should know that maa is concerned for you. She worries about your future because you are the only one she has. She fears for you. But I want you not to give up your dreams. Now that you’re stepping to the real world, you must know how to handle situations tactfully. Not just the situations but also the people who are creating them. You’ll find many people dominating you in your office especially, the male workers, but I want you to be strong like Maa.” Payal listens to all his words with agreement. Then they together hum Christina Aguilera’s song, *‘cause it makes me that much stronger, makes me work a little bit harder....* her brother’s favourite song they used to sing together.

Luckily, she reached office on time. Being an Indian girl, she touches the ground before entering into the building like Indians do before a temple. With giant hopes, she takes a deep breath and opens the glass door. As she was moving forward looking at the wall paintings, she dashed into a woman who seemed to be in her late twenties. Payal noticed that the woman eyes was swollen and was red like she was crying.

“Hi, I am Payal Mehta. Today is my first day at the job.”

Putting up a forced smile, the woman replies, “Hello, I am Anupama. If I am not wrong, you joined as an assistant producer to this house”

“Yes, that’s right. Can you do me a favour? Can you show me the way to Mr. Raj Khurana’s office? I think he is going to train me for a while.”

Hesitantly Anupama replies, “Umm...yeah... well, his office is in third floor. Would you mind taking the stairs up since the lift is under maintenance at the current moment?” Payal agrees to do so humbly.

Once Payal reaches the third floor, she finds the cabin with the name plate on the door, ‘Producer Raj Khurana’ written on it. For the last time, she nervously runs her fingers through hair to check if it is neat enough and tucks the remaining loose strands behinds her ears. She knocked at the door and while entering into the room she felt like her heart would explode inside out of nervousness. After all, she was going to meet the famous and the dynamic producer, Raj Khurana.

“And who are you, miss..?” Payal clears her throat and replies in stutters, “Hello, I... I am Payal...Payal Mehta and I am your diehard fan. I have watched all the movies you have produced and I even follow you twitter.”

Furiously Raj screams at her, “Who let you inside the office? Where’s the security? Do you think my cabin is Mumbai’s Juhu beach where you can come and go and stroll around whenever you feel like?”

As soon as Payal realises what she had blabbered out unintentionally, she says, “S...sorry sir..... I am Payal Mehta and....”

“I know, I know you are my diehard fan and have watched all the movies I have produced. So what? Get out of my cabin before I call security and arrest you.”

“.....and I follow you on twitter....Oops! Sorry again.... I’m here for the job of assistant producer.”

Raj calms down and says, “Where’s your offer letter? Show me.” Payal takes the letter out of folder and extends it towards him. Raj snatches the letter in a rude way. To Payal’s horror, he tears the appointment letter into pieces and throws every bit of it to Payal’s face. Before Payal could figure out what just happened, holding Payal’s hand, Raj takes her out of her cabin.

“Where the hell is the security? Who let this filthy intruder into our office?” Many other employees started gathering around, mainly male employees and Anupama. “You girl, have you seen your face in mirror? Which background are you from? Assistant Producer, eh? Can you even spell the words ‘assistant’ and ‘producer’?” Just then the HR and the executive producer, Srikant Sinha, who had recruited Payal, came hurriedly not knowing the situation. “I had warned you Srikant that I do not want see another girl in my office for this new project. Do you think this movie is some kind of a joke to you and to all of us? Will this girl be able to do errands for me? If required, will she stay till late night and work in the office or anywhere outside? She is a girl for Christ’s sake! Do you think working for a production company is same as cooking biryani at home? I have already made a mistake hiring Anupama and very soon I am going to get rid of her. After all, this is a men’s world where even the darkness of the night cannot be hurdle in our way success.”

“A-S-S-I-S-T-A-N-T P-R-O-D-U-C-E-R” Payal speaks out wiping her tears with her purple sleeve.

“What?” Raj turns towards her in surprise not understanding Payal’s words.

“With all due respect, Mr.Raj Khurana, I am trying to spell the words ‘Assistant’ and ‘Producer’ as you asked me. Before coming to the office, I considered myself to be the luckiest one, because I was going with someone I worshipped all my life. I was wrong to have given you that great position in my life. But I do not regret coming to this office or meeting you today. I never will. You seemed to be taking much pride of manhood and of your project”. Payal approaches closer to Raj. ”Let me tell you one thing, Mr. Raj Khurana, today I will prove you and your shameless male employees, who did nothing but to stood fixed and watched me get humiliated, that a girl can do much more than just cooking biryani

at home. And I promise that with full respect you will hand me another appointment letter with your signature below. Choose any three challenges of your choice and I'll be ready to beat you."

Raj had tears of laughter in his eyes. "Yet another feminist. You girls never fail to surprise me. After all this, you still have the audacity to challenge me right inside my office. How can you stoop so low in order to become a wannabe? Alright, the battles will be... let me think...okay, word power, arm wrestling and a complete wrestling. Well, I am not as ruthless as you think. I will arrange all the medical facilities for you. If I win, which is obvious, I will call cops and get you arrested, Ms Payal."

"And if I win," says Payal "you'll kneel in front of everyone and rub your nose at my and Anupama's feet, lick those and wash only to drink the water" She could hear the loud murmurs around the corridor.

For a moment, this bit of act scared Payal a little, but she remembered her brother's advice to be strong.

The first battle was the word power. Everybody got ready around the round table. Payal let Raj start the game. "Vulnerable" Raj said. "En masse" Payal shot up.

"Encryption"

"netiquette". And so game went on for another 30 minutes. Payal knew English vocabulary has always been her forte. And she was right. Raj was pretty exhausted and certainly ran out of words. He tried to seek help from others, Payal's strong eyes glaring at him suppressed his urge to cheat.

Raj was still confident that he will win the arm wrestling and the complete wrestling, because according to him these games were made for the men only. They held each other's palm and placed their elbow on the same table. A referee was made to see if both the elbows were on same plain. Raj showed his entire set of teeth and number of the local police station flashing on his iPhone screen to Payal. Payal gave a smirk as a reply to him and to everyone that she is not to be easily terrorized. The referee rang a single bell from his smartphone and both the players moved their shoulders closer to each other. At first, Raj was overpowering Payal with his strong arms. Payal's elbow was about to slip. Noticing this Raj felt he can easily outwit Payal with mind games by hurting her self-confidence. "You know what, Ms. I-am-stronger, who will give a job after you have a criminal record, or worse who will take your hand for marriage? Well, I can give you a proposal. After you come out of the jail, come to me. I might have a maid's job for you then." Payal answers in loud whispers enough to be heard across the room, "Let's see who is best fit for the maid's job", and turns her head towards the bottle of water placed just beside the flower pot. Before Raj could have a fraction of second to look at the bottle, Payal knocks his hand down to the table. Horrified, Raj couldn't think straight of how could get outwitted from that girl. He claimed for a rematch

saying that Payal tried to divert his mind towards the bottle, but Payal proudly got out of the chair and walked away dividing the crowd apart.

Time for the final battle. Raj's self-confidence was shaken by Payal badly. Since he had never seen a girl wrestling and getting herself dirty, there was still a fine ray of hope in his mind. A mattress was summoned to be placed as they could not find any typical wrestling pit in the premises and therefore there's no point of getting dirty in the mud. As they stepped onto the mattress, different emotions reflecting in their eyes. Payal's eyes had the hunger to win the challenge for herself and for every other girls out there who were struggling to protect their identity in this harsh world. And Raj eyes seemed to be nervously anticipating his shame and his throat was moving continuously, like he is trying to swallow every bit of saliva in his mouth. Other employees had never seen something like this before. Even Anupama prayed for Payal under her breathe. They took each other hand in hand and tried to knock each other out in every way they can. When she was a kid, Payal had learnt few techniques of wrestling from her brother like locking the opponent's hands and legs. But Raj definitely was heavy to be knocked down on his entire back on the ground and Payal was not a professional wrestler. All she do was to pray the goddess of Luck. Payal tactfully locked Raj's feet, but before she could do anything to his hands, sly Raj forcefully put his right palm on Payal nose and mouth so as to get her suffocated. Finding no way to escape the devil's clutch, she gave a hard elbow punch to Raj's belly. Raj felt like Thor just hit his gut with hammer. No sooner did he release Payal's face, than Payal flipped him down to the mattress.

After getting defeated, Raj had no option but to surrender to Payal since Payal had deeply wounded the heroic stature and made his manhood spineless. Payal turns her head towards Anupama and sees the tears of joy in her eyes. As for the deal, Raj bows down to the feet of Payal and Anupama and rubs his nose at it. He brings a bottle of water and washes their feet and drinks it before everyone with tears in his eyes, not of laughter but of shame this time. Payal takes the bottle from his hand and hits him with it trying exactly not to injure his face. "Ahem! Are we all missing something? Where's the paper in your hand with your signature on it?" Lastly, he signs another appointment letter for Payal and recruits her back as a trainee. He even apologises Anupama for ill-treating her earlier that day and days before.

"Mr. Raj Khurana, I think your background has never taught you to respect a woman. It is a pity that the Indian public fail to see how ruthless you are to sabotage the women class and spend so much to buy your movie tickets. They live with a wrong idea, that since you cast top rated celebrities to portray the female leads, you actually think of a woman the same way. You just care the awards and money."

Payal gleefully came running out of the office with the offer letter in hand. She knew she achieved something more than the appointment and she wished her brother was there with her to share the trophy. "Congrats, my dearest sister." Her brother appeared out of the blue. "What are you doing here outside my office?" asked Payal astonishingly. "I was always there with you, my little sister, even before my death." Payal's eyes were all wet and she knew how much she missed her elder brother, Pratik. He went for an adventurous trip, despite

all the protests of her mother, never to come back home alive. Her brother was now ready go back to the world from where no one can return. Before saying goodbye, he reminded Payal to remember how much maa loves her and being women, both of them are really strong, although their ideologies differ. And for the last time they sang together “*Cause it makes me that much stronger, makes me work a little bit harder.*”