

LIVING

Why Blame the Office Girl?

by Fayza Haq



Office alone, or is it?

— Photo: Monorama

It is often assumed in a wife-versus-office girl case that the office girl had fairly kidnapped, pirated and absconded with the husband, when the man was on his knees begging to be rescued from the routine of his inane and insufferable existence. The man is not quite sure where he wants to go but he has this obsession that he must escape somewhere.

Whenever such a conflict arises the wife does not stop to think or hesitate before putting all the blame on the office girl, most often not realising that a lot of the blame was hers at the outset for her careless indifferent and even heartless treatment of his disappointments and success. The wife does not lose her male out of the blue. It is a slow painful process in which her own interest in the warmth of the home is over or confused and distorted that makes the male turn elsewhere for respite.

Very often the secretary or assistant, or whoever this rival is at the office, is less cunning, calculating and scheming than the wife believes. Yet the concept of romancing with the rain falling like sheets, the moon shining beautifully or sharing the evocative candlelit table-for-two can be more tempting than all the gold in the realms for this somewhat immature woman in her twenties or even thirties. With the tedium of office life and little to come back to at home herself she too is bound to be lonely and when the attractive and masculine creature comes her way and begs to accompany her she can hardly be blamed for seeking this escape mechanism from the drudgery of everyday existence. She wants to forget her files, papers appointments, typewriters, calculating machines and telephone messages.

It is not necessary for this much-debated woman to have the figure of a Sophia Loren or a Marilyn Monroe. She does not have to be as unique as Liza Minelli or lively as Jane Fonda. It is not the face nor the hourglass figure of a siren that lures and beguiles the tired, bored and disillusioned man. He is not enchanted out of his wits by some legendary mermaid or snow queen. Often, in the office romances the looks are of secondary importance. It is the hope and promise of having a new vision and outlet for his frustration, and some-

one with whom to share his disappointments and success. The wife does not lose her male out of the blue. It is a slow painful process in which her own interest in the warmth of the home is over or confused and distorted that makes the male turn elsewhere for respite.

Wife's Headaches

Of course the wife has many headaches and drawbacks, such as managing and minding the servants the electrician, plumbers and driver, and seeing that the children are safe from sickness well fed and well educated. She must keep the household accounts and make ends meet with the limited money the male brings home. She has, moreover to meet the fanciful choice of the husband of dressing, eating vacationing and even of meeting people at the conventional teas and lunches. If he wants his brown evening suit today he will want his blue for the same occasion tomorrow. It he had "peas-palau" for supper yesterday he may or may not insist on the same menu today and the day after. His choice, preference and whims have to be catered to by the wife as royal prerogatives apart from seeing to the all-important routine of the home. But the office girl too does not exactly survive without her rigid list of chores and "must" to attend to as if they were a matter of life and death.

What charms the man to the said office girl is his compulsion to run away from loneliness and to the prospect of finding someone to comprehend his deep seated fears, hopes and ambitions, and to understand his vision of life from his own viewpoint. In a contented union wife is not very far

from her male as to lose sight of his personal problem and opinions. But often she drifts in a complicated and confused world of her own and fails to share his dreams and expectations.

The fact that she often nags him and scolds him for one failing or another can be stifling for mutual existence. The office girl can sense it when the boss is constantly checked at home and even in company for one mistake or shortcoming. He looks lost and harassed in that case, and goes around with the look of a lost overgrown puppy that is dying to be fussed over and petted. The way she criticises him even in company, were as if he were a misbehaved schoolchild who must be corrected and punished for his own good. She might have been a ministering angel had he been caught up in some plight such as if he had been sick and suffering. Yet somehow, with the prospect of everyday existence, she becomes a sour puss and frets and fumes over every small mishap blaming her male into the bargain, finding him a docile scapegoat.

The wife forgets all the instructions about being a good audience and of playing up to her husband's fancy and ego. All the lessons she had, in turn learned from her mother, about showing off her male to his advantage are set at naught or swept aside. Most women are born actresses but somehow with the passage of time in a marriage they fail to use their talent in company for the sake of the male.

After the tiring day at the office with so many things going awry, what the male needs is an active supporter to his way of life and a patient listener to the stories of disappointments and frustra-

tions that he has to role out. The wife is too preoccupied, or tense with her problems of maintaining the home to notice his crying needs for a kind and understanding partner to second him about his, views. He needs someone to help him bear the burden of despair when things go wrong in the office and similarly share his outbursts of happiness at break throughs.

When one investigates deep the so-called scandalous and hedonistic office romance it proves to be one long traumatic experience for the girl. When she is first invited to dinner by the male she is full of apprehensions of his frivolity and possible flirtation. She is, in fact, panic stricken that he might create a scene which both would later regret bitterly.

No Flirtation

However, he turns out to speak in abstract terms about his dreams and his personal utopias. He brings in his home life too and is peculiarly devoted to his wife and children. He speaks at length about his hobbies and interests. He is seldom flirtatious although the element of flirtation might just creep in with growing discontentment and disillusionment with the wife as she, in turn, gets over confident slipshod about her own responsibilities.

The girl in the office knows a thing or two about how to turn the conversations as she has a fair idea of the fever and fret in the office, and she herself longs to have a patient listener to her problems. She knows too well that complaint about the servants or children or odd gossips about the neighbours would have no interest for a weary and exhausted office worker.

With repeated dates for dinners on weekends the girl soon realises that she is amply fascinated by the man. But what she next experiences after flashes of ecstasy is complete despair. Her rules of good sportsmanship tell her that no matter how tempting it may be, and however fair and reasonable it might prove to be she cannot be a home-breaker. And so she is left to nurse her wounds on her own, time after time, while the wife has all the prerogatives of being bad tempered off mood badly — dressed and what have you. The office girl, however, has no such breaks. Yet how long will she cling on to her job and the wife get away with her moods and tantrums?

Trade Organisation (WTO).

Besides being an important part of the islanders' social and cultural life, the exotic brew has the potential to become a major source of export income for island economies selling it to foreign drug firms and countries with large South Pacific communities.

Australia is the third biggest market — after Germany and the United States — for SPF countries, with Fiji exporting 74,000-kg in 1994 to Australia, earning some US\$4.66 million.

The kava industry is very labour-intensive and employs some 6,000 people in Vanuatu and over 39,000 others in Fiji. Even external aid donors have encouraged rural communities to grow more kava which brings higher returns than other cash crops.

Thus, at a time when Australia is threatening to cut its aid to the South Pacific, the ban on the import of kava will be a double blow to these struggling economies.

Pacific islanders argue kava should be under the same category as tobacco, tea, coffee and alcohol — all of which could be imported and sold here.

At a meeting in Darwin in early August, representatives from the SPF, the South Pacific and Aboriginal communities in Australia, food technologists and government officials agreed there should be a regulated trade in kava instead of a total ban.

The meeting also urged that kava be classified in the same group as coffee and alcohol. The recommendation was passed on to the NFA board, which has agreed to review the ban.

"We are not looking to have complete free and easy access to kava. We are looking at the potential of certain importers (and distributors) in Australia being licensed," says McKay.

Brooding Over Native Brew

South Pacific islanders are rallying against an Australian ban on the import of their native brew. Kalinga Seneviratne of Inter Press Service reports



AUSTRALIAN authorities unable to decide whether a South Pacific native brew was a drug or a poison deemed it harmful enough to be banned last year.

But they have not had peace since, with the country's 80,000-strong South Pacific community continually hitting the National Food Authority (NFA) for keeping kava imports off Australian shores.

"The ban has victimised the entire Pacific community," says Inoki Fotu Huakau, liaison officer for the South Pacific community at the New South Wales education department. He says many Pacific islanders are not highly literate in English and it is at kava parties that they

learn about social welfare services.

Kava is actually a tranquillising non-alcoholic drink made from the dried root of the pepper plant. It has been used for generations by South Pacific islanders in ceremonies to mark births, marriages, deaths and other social occasions.

Kava was first classified by the NFA as a drug in 1985, then declared a poison in 1990, back to a drug in 1993. In March 1994, it was declared a prohibited botanical, which could be impounded by quarantine authorities.

NFA senior toxicologist Ian McKay admits the problem arose because the NFA has grouped kava along with plants that were drugs,

which cannot be added to food.

Don Prasad, proprietor of Fiji Market in Sydney, is reluctant to talk about the financial implications of the kava ban on his business, but he says it has had a devastating impact on the social life of the Pacific islanders here.

"They are missing out on their traditional life," he points out. "When they need kava for ceremonial purposes like when someone dies, they can't find it."

Echoing their concerns is the 15-nation South Pacific Forum (SPF). It says the ban discriminates against the South Pacific community and may be in breach of Australia's free trade commitments under "The World

Anything Good on the Telly Tonight?

by Shahpar Salim

RECENTLY a friend joked that the background music at his house is Zee TV. His mother likes to switch on to Zee while she does her housework. Another friend was trying to call her mother from school and was skeptical about finding her at home at that time of the day. However as soon as her servant picked up the phone at the other end, my friend sighed in relief. "I can hear ATN music going on, Amma must be home, then. Thank God!" She said she could tell instantly by the Hindi music playing that her mother must be home. The topic of media invasion and our noble youth being asphyxiated by alien (hence 'bad') culture is like a squeezed out lime. Enough has been said about it, too much worrying has been done about it. Still no reasonable compromise has been found, short of cutting off Star Plus and Channel V completely; like digging our heads into the sand and hoping it will go away somehow. But that's just it! We always talk about the horrors of Channel V, but what about our young and old alike, transfixed by Zee TV, ATN and Channel EL? Is that a part of Bengali culture?

Admittedly the use of the word "transfixed" in the above context is unfair. Literally it means to be rooted to the spot, paralyzed, pierced with a lance of horror. Generally it means being totally fascinated by something not necessarily good. Our fascination with the Zee TV brand of Indian culture is not necessarily bad, whatever my own personal bias may be. As Pirsig said,

"And what is good, Phaedrus.

And what is not good — Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?"

My first point is, who am I to talk, a self-confessed Channel V ex-junkie? It's true. When MTV first started, my friends and I watched a lot of it. But those were the days of Danny McGill and coherent intelligent messages. And then suddenly a lot of things changed. We finally got out of our teens and in terms of personal growth, we changed considerably within a very short time. MTV was no more. Channel V came on the air with a very different outlay. They started playing a certain kind of music predominantly. Namely rap and techno dance music. Personally I do not like rap very much, specially not listening to it at home. Suddenly Channel V has little to offer to me except for the odd non-rap programme.

The message in the music is very important and what the African-American rap culture has to say to our younger siblings is rather shocking. They largely propagate the land of "cool attitude" where the boys are "uberdudes" and

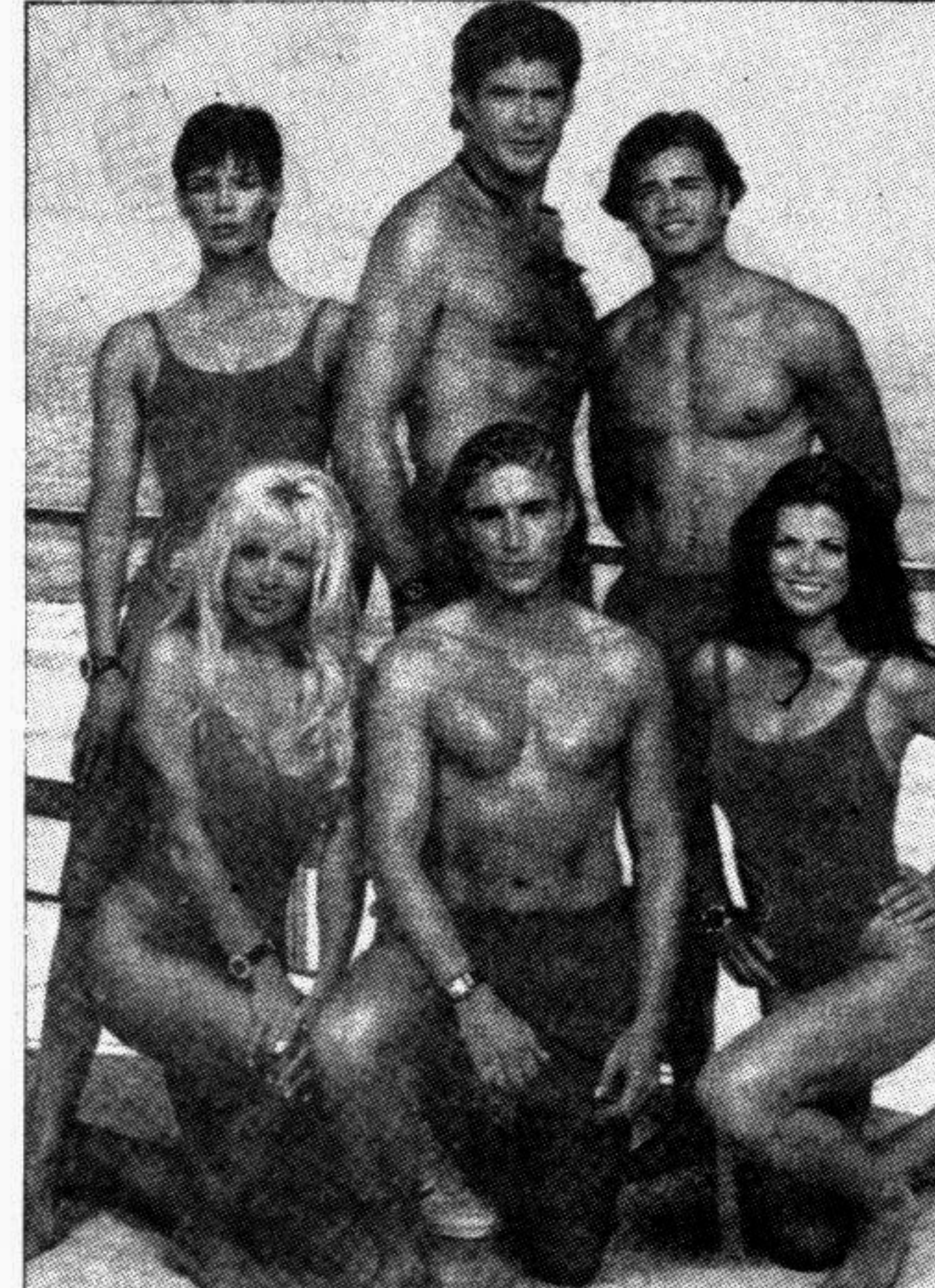
the girls are "chicks." It is the land of the 24 hours-a-day party with no hangovers to tire their "hot bods". I really do not blame our parents when they generalize on the whole of the western world to be filled with such id infested myopic people. The kind of western inner city attitudes and values that these rap videos project come across as irresponsible and disrespectful in our Bangladeshi culture. No matter where you run, you have to face it, at the end of the day, we are Bengali people and you have to know where to draw the line. The same

here who generalize that all women are to be seen/imagined like that. Also, our parents think that this is what goes on when friends get together to enjoy themselves. I object because both parties could not be more mistaken. But is there anything we can do about it? Because the judgment of what is good and what is bad should come from within. It's not that the messages of sex and drugs are new to music. Rock n Roll was full of it even before. But never this flagrantly. Before you had to know to understand, but now the message of irresponsible

als are not popular? Whatever happened to the old songs? Doesn't anybody write songs like those anymore? All I hear are versions of "Teri naani mari tou mein kiya kaaron?" The lyrics and the body movements talk about the basest of emotions (rather, urges) and the most vulgar analogies are drawn out. And all that needless huffing and puffing... how can we turn a blind eye to such vulgarity while we are so outraged at western vulgarity? Sexual innuendo is cheap, repulsive and degrading in any language. But a lot of people are totally unconcerned about this. For every kid I've seen who dances like Akshay Kumar or Govinda, I've seen two adults who cheer him on. And these are descent elder folk. How can they be so blind?

Bengali culture, as such, is not resilient enough to accept western music without a murmur and ever since I can remember, we the ones who used to listen to western music were frowned upon as heretics who listen to "Engrezi gaan." The more extreme points of view held that we are abandoning our Bengali culture and this country has absolutely no future culturally. All good and wholesome things are going to die with our parental generation. They wondered what we could possibly see in music from a different culture, and what they did not understand, they thought was bad. Interestingly enough, this bias is absent in the case of people listening exclusively to Hindi music, just because Hindi culture is newer to our own. Why? Just because western music is different from eastern music? Why must there be an issue of one being better than the other? They are just different kinds of music and we all think that our "different" is better than their "different". Let us not drag out the "good eastern music vs bad western music issue. Let us just agree to disagree. My taste in music has definite leanings towards the west and I do same way they think R E M Clapton, U2, Floyd and the Doors are pure noise. Fair enough.

The doyens and protectors of our Bengali heritage really do not have to worry about the western culture completely obliterating ours. Our heritage of Bengali music is too rich and beautiful to be ever threatened by western culture. If you ever doubt this, go to the Pahela Boishakh celebrations and count the young people you see there. The crowds at the Ekushey book fair and the pulse of the Bangla Academy will ensure the longevity of our national culture and heritage. Bengali culture is spread out over the land, we should not be threatened by what is merely a conduit of the west. As for the young people who seem to be more taken with R E M than Rabindranath, all this does not mean they are not Bengalis anymore. It takes a certain kind of maturity to appreciate the purity of traditional (as opposed to the "Roop Suhana Lagta Hein" kind) music. What makes me sad is the fact that only the bad things are so popular in the media and are being watched by two different age groups. Is the Hindi film music a cross cultural counterpart of American rap music? That is a whole area for the social anthropologists to study. But what is bad and what is good is not to be asked of others nor should they be the ones to tell us. Just how seriously we should take the dish antenna on the roof is up to each of us. Absolute censorship of the different channels seems a bit extreme. Pretending it does not exist will not make it go away. Unfortunately for children, television is the elixir to all boredom and that is when parents have to intervene. But when should we be the ones to decide what is good? It is all up to our conscience. You be the judge. As Pirsig said, "Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?"



Pappa don't preach, I'm on the trouble beach. — Photo: Cineblitz

way I see these kids assuming this borrowed "cool attitude culture," the parents, too, are thinking that anything western is bad.

At the same time, parents need to realize that even the western parents do not like what is happening over there. They are just as worried and anxious. A recent hit song goes, "This Is How We Do It." Well, if you are too un-cool, too young or even too old to know what "It" means here, the video is there to educate you. The "It" here is copulation at will. Technically, it shows a group of young people at an innocuous party. The female population here are in perpetual summer and are fawning over their comparatively over-clothed male counterparts. I suppose that these models in these music videos are aware of the image they portray but — hey! I object because this message is spilt over to the men over

sexual gratification is thrown at your face. What parents need to know is that, there exists a certain age group among us young people who are just as revolted as you.

The same aspect can be seen in the current Hindi film songs. But the interesting thing is that nobody seems to be much bothered about this invasion of hip swinging vulgar music. All this hip swinging, pelvic thrusting and a whole lot of other movements which we have all pretended not to notice in the past; they all say the same things as these dreared rap videos do. But a remarkable lack of concern about these vulgar songs surprises me. Why are they accepted without an eyebrow being raised? Just because they are a part of Indian culture which is very close and similar to our own? Well it may be a part of the Indian culture and I am all in favour of cultural strengthening through free cultural interchange, but how come we allow vulgarity just because it is close to home? Vulgarity is the same in any language. So how come we do not talk about media intervention and moral corruption when it comes to vulgar film music? It seems to me that this kind of music does more damage morally as it reaches out to a wider audience, to the young and to our parental generation as well. A large portion of our parental generation are positively hooked to Zee TV type music and entertainment. Who is there now to safeguard our morals?

Current Hindi film music leaves a lot to be desired. Nine out of every 10 songs in any countdown bores me. Nothing seems new. Either the hero and the heroine are dancing around hills with a hundred synchronized dancers behind them. Or getting drenched in the rain, wearing absolutely no rain-wear and very little else besides. Or it's the heroine's birthday party song — complete with mournful hero at the white piano, the morose guests, the coy heroine and her absolutely fulminating father looking on. Shall we count the cliches in that one? How come Hindi ghaz-



Claudia Schiffer — Photo: Paris Match

COOKERY

Chocolate Shortbread Biscuits

4 oz. flour
4 oz. butter or margarine
3 oz. sugar
1 oz. ground rice
1 tablespoonful cocoa
Rub the fat into the flour and add dry ingredients.

Knead all together to a smooth dough then roll into a round 1/2 in. thick. Crimp the edges with fingers and thumb. Place on a baking sheet, prick well and mark into nine triangular sections. Bake in a moderate oven until firm (about 1 hour).