

Spot the patriarchy



#ResearchMesearch

NADINE SHAANTA MURSHID

LAST year I attended a talk where the mayor of Dhaka North was a speaker. I had asked him a question. He responded. After the talk he asked me what I do. I gave him my credentials: Assistant Professor at University at Buffalo. A woman standing next to him during this exchange—an acquaintance I know socially—quipped: Oh, teaching assistant? How sweet! I said no, and repeated my credentials. I would have said more if I could gather my wits that quickly. Or not. I still can't think of an appropriate response.

What do you do when someone infantilises you because you're a young(ish) woman? There were men in that room with the same credentials as I. Did anyone ask them if they were teaching assistants? Of course not. To make things worse, someone actually advised me to take that as a compliment, reminding me how we let them get away with everyday misogyny (or internalised misogyny) by pretending that they perhaps had good intentions. That's rubbish—I had said, invoking our esteemed finance minister—I'm not buying that.

A friend, a woman, recently told me, that her boss—not a woman—sent their team an email saying that she was struggling and needed help. When she told him that she wasn't struggling but merely had a few questions, he responded, his tone almost paternalistic, as if he was looking out for her, helping the proverbial damsel in distress: Aharay, mind korechho? (Poor thing! Did you mind?)

Another friend, another woman, got a raise recently. But, she was asked to not tell her senior male colleagues about it because it would upset them. Why? One might ask. Because these men have benefited from male privilege for so long that when women get raises it upsets (at least some of) them. So

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much so that even the administration knows about it, and plays along, speaking to how entrenched patriarchy is. Not to diminish all men; many men are feminists, and allies of women and other oppressed groups (indeed, we need men as allies, because it's not always easy or safe for women to speak about their experiences). But, unfortunately, far too many men are not.

We know this because these stories of working women navigating patriarchy and patriarchal norms are neither new nor unexpected. We know this because these stories are not from my grandmother's time but happening now, in 2017. What, perhaps, is new is that some institutions are at least attempting to navigate the patriarchal system, but it's a drop in the ocean.

Let me elaborate with an example.

Much of my academic work is on structural and social problems. What I've realised over the years, as I've studied institutions, is that we are often made to take personal responsibility for structural problems, even though there are no individual solutions to begin with. But, that's the mantra of neoliberal institutions. They "responsibilise" the citizenry, create consumers out of them, and tell them that they can buy their way out of social problems—be good citizens by being good consumers.

An example: climate change.

A solution that we are often given: washing clothes with cold-water setting (instead of hot) on our washing machines. This is in line with global messages about going "green." I want a green earth. But, I'm not buying this solution. Why? You might ask. Because, using cold water will not significantly reduce the carbon footprint of the world. The irony is that much of the carbon footprint comes from factories like the ones that produce these washing machines in the first place. So, by responsibilising me they get me to buy a washing machine, and associated upgrades that promote efficiency, and in return I feel altruistic, dutiful, as if I'm saving the world. Only, I am not.

This is symptomatic of the problem



ILLUSTRATION: MUSTAFA RAFID AMIN

of patriarchy, and the solutions that claim to "smash the patriarchy." The solutions are welcome, but they often seem like lip service. When an organisation recognises the labour of women, gives them raises, but keeps it hush-hush, they are basically just buying the washing machine and feeling good about themselves. They are not actually changing social norms that support the subjugation of women, or challenging those that support the gender wage-gap.

When empowerment programmes provide skills training for women to help them find employment, they help the women individually. However, these initiatives don't change cultural norms that trivialise the problem of sexual harassment at work and on the streets. They prepare women to enter the labour market, but do nothing about men who are somehow always surprised by it, and too often they take

women's work as a sign that women are promiscuous, easy, available. In doing so, these empowerment organisations inadvertently contribute to victim-blaming narratives of sexual harassment by putting women in places without making those places safe for them, by not doing enough to change the conversation about sexual harassment.

This is akin to paternalistic bosses patronising women employees in the name of "help" but do not affect meaningful change within the organisation that could help women. There is no understanding that the so-called "help" can potentially put their employees at risk of experiencing other forms of distress; that they might be perceived as inefficient or under/unqualified.

Then there are those women who have internalised misogyny—they look down on other women. They claim

they don't get along with other women. They echo tropes like "women are other women's worst enemies." They slut-shame. They blame women for their problems. They think women are not as smart or qualified as men. They demean or infantilise other women to feel superior. They deprecate the word "feminist." This is not an exhaustive list, but you get the drift.

Part of the reason why women may internalise misogyny is simple: it's everywhere, it's the hegemon, it's how social and family life is ordered and structured. Some women have found ways to benefit from patriarchy, in the way of navigating the system by using the system. But, it's problematic when their stance is absolutely anti-women. Women who are in the business of trafficking women come to mind. Women who beat their housemaids come to mind. Women who defend the beating of housemaids come to mind. As does the woman who thought it appropriate to question my credentials because I don't fit the profile of a typical professor.

What becomes clear is that patriarchy affects everyone across class and social barriers. Patriarchy is not just a feminist's problem, it's everyone's problem. Patriarchy is in the business of controlling and maintaining control over women in all spheres of life. Most men deny its existence because they benefit from it. (But men, too, suffer in systems like this, because patriarchy is also in the business of creating toxic masculinity of which many men become victims. More on this on a different day.) In some countries it's a little less overt than others; in some countries it's a little more sophisticated than we are used to seeing.

Patriarchy is like water; it flows into all the systems—from religion to governments to educational institutions to businesses. Ergo, it becomes important to spot patriarchy in its many guises. Maybe a tech startup can design and develop a game: Spot the Patriarchy.

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Time to take a pause



SHIFTING IMAGES

MILIA ALI

FORGIVE me, dear readers, for this rather unconventional column—about "nothingness"! Of late, I am increasingly enjoying the leisure of doing simply nothing. The sensational daily newspaper headlines, the racy TV commentaries on the downhill plunge of US politics, the friendly bridge games with neighbours, even one and one lunches with close friends—seem to have lost their allure. Often, I find myself making last minute calls regretting invites and cancelling engagements, preferring to do nothing. (Thankfully, a retired life provides me the escape from the daily grind).

This self-imposed reclusive phase was triggered by a simple episode. I was rushing to a Tai Chi class on a busy Tuesday that was already filled with a morning dentist appointment and an afternoon meeting with my book club (the book was half finished). Noticing my stressed out expression, my husband asked: "Why are you going to Tai Chi?" "To relax," I blurted out. "Why go to the class to relax, why not unwind on the patio for half an hour simply enjoying the gorgeous day? Don't push yourself to do things that you think might relax you." I realised the wisdom of these words. And chose to spend some



PHOTO: THE MELTING WATCH BY SALVADOR DALI, 1952

time simply gazing at the blue sky. These inactive moments could be considered as an utter waste of time. They were not part of a schedule or timetable; they were a chronological anomaly. But they are stuck in my mind as some of the most memorable of the past few weeks.

Please don't misunderstand my intentions—I am neither promoting laziness nor advocating a hedonistic outlook to life. Although I believe in a strong work ethic, I have come to realise that these rare moments of nothingness contribute to happiness and tranquillity. Perhaps I need to

elaborate on my point of view. Like most of my generation, I was brought up to believe that work is virtuous. Hence, in my youth, I filled my days pursuing worthwhile activities—something, anything with a purpose. Even conversations had to be full of vigour and without pauses.

In my short stint as a teacher, I was afraid of the odd question from a student that might push me into silence—for a lack of fluency was equated with a lack of knowledge. Heaven forbid if people should think I have "nothing to say"! But the truth is, these days I frequently find myself in situations where I have "nothing to add" to social conversations. I especially tune out of long-winded accounts of extraordinary feats by friends' children and inane chatter about holiday trips spent in five star luxury. Isn't there already a surfeit of that on Facebook?

Having reached the outskirts of old age, I have realised that pointless hours have been spent trying to "do" what I thought was required of me. In the process I missed out on many enriching experiences. Films or plays that I should have seen, books that I should have read, places that I should have visited, sick relatives and friends that I should have spent time with. Can I catch up on all that I missed? Perhaps not. But I have learnt a valuable lesson—that time need not always be measured by the utility it yields. While I admire those who are "doing" great things—creating music, writing stories and developing new computer apps—I was not meant for great things. Hence, time has a different dimension and meaning for me! And it's worthwhile to enjoy the purposeless moments of solitude. This doesn't mean that my mind dwells in a vacuum. It just means taking time off from the internet,

social gatherings and routine tasks to connect with my memories, desires, regrets, recriminations, awareness of mortality and so on. "Time for visions and revisions," as TS Eliot's Prufrock put it.

The truth is that taking a break from the routine activities frees our mind to perceive the sights and sounds that are often hidden by the noises in the system. Thank God that Rabindranath Tagore was not fixated on "doing". He often paused to experience the mysteries of nature by connecting with them rather than glossing over them as a mere spectator. The chant of the birds, the rustle of the breeze and the silence of the sky created an indelible impression on him. These contemplative interludes produced the most beautiful poetry and music. Unfortunately, for ordinary people like me a mundane physical activity like listening to the chirping of the cicadas does not yield metaphysical outcomes. But it does have a profound effect on my being since it helps me align myself to the rhythm and beauty of our world. And that is why I think it's worth taking a break from all the routine tasks and doing "nothing". It may not be a state that one can sustain, but it's something that one must try once in a while to discover "in broad daylight, Streams full of stars, like skies at night."

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A WORD A DAY

PARALIAN
noun

One who lives by the sea

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Music's Waller

5 Articles

10 Clarifying phrase

12 Infant's ailment

13 Special jargon

14 Letter after psi

15 Freud topic

16 Phonograph part

18 Throat mass

20 Catch some z's

21 Garden tools

23 Switch settings

24 Acute

26 Humorist Sahl

28 Pewter component

29 Winter weather

31 Outdated

32 Taste bud locale

36 Fallon's show

39 Pitching stat

40 Dwelling

41 Puts on the wall

43 Soda bottle size

44 Bender

45 Calliope need

46 Hardy heroine

DOWN

1 Steak cut

2 Baja buddy

3 Mortise partner

4 Decline

5 Computer symbol

6 Big book

7 Franklin's wife

8 Wandering worker

9 Rascals

11 Sewing supplies

17 Flamenco cheer

19 That lady

22 Uses a sander on

24 Information unit

25 Postscript

27 Possess

28 Rings up

30 Ultimate

33 Movie category

34 Goats on

35 Alleviates

37 Brain-storm

38 Disease cause

42 Gifted

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

T	I	P	P	E	R	A	R	G	O	
A	D	H	E	R	E	S	E	E	P	
R	A	I	S	I	N	S	C	O	T	
T	E	T	H	E	R					
H	E	R	O		A	R	E	A	S	
O	R	E		W	A	T	T	A	G	
L	I	T		I	C	E		T	I	
S	C	R	A	P	E	D		E	N	
T	H	E	R	E		E	D	G	Y	
A	R	R	E	S	T					
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O	B	E	Y		C	L	E	R	I	
W	E	D	S		H	E	R	E	S	Y

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT