

MYM LITERATURE

A hand with light blue nail polish holds a pink heart-shaped object. To its right is a stylized, flowing flame in shades of orange and yellow. The background is dark.

The Last Daughter of the Scroll

by Ayesha Zulfiqar

Where Muslims come home to reflect

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Once upon a time, in a kingdom not so far away, there lived a little girl, like any other, quietly waiting for love to find her. People she trusted most told her that to be loved, she had to be desirable. And to be desirable, she had to follow a set of commandments inscribed in an ancient scroll—yellowed and crinkled with age, the ink brittle and faded, yet the script densely carried the weight of centuries of tradition. The commandments—broad in reach and heavy in consequence—revolved around a single, unspoken truth: *serve others, never yourself.*

The first commandment was never spoken aloud, but she heard it clearly in the sharp *shhh* that sliced through the air when she once laughed too loudly on a crisp Sunday afternoon when her family gathered in front of the TV. Her laughter was bright and unrestrained—until it was swallowed, like light devoured by sudden shadow. PTV News was airing current affairs, and her laughter was fracturing their focus. That moment taught her something she didn't yet have words for: *even joy must seek permission.* Even joy must be quiet. From then on, she learned to hold her laughter in. To soften her voice. To shrink her presence. And it worked. The sharp looks softened when she withered. The air around her grew calmer when she took up less of it. She was meant to be seen, but not to be heard—and

it made her easier to love.

The next commandment came dressed as a gift, to “protect” her fragile soul from the harshness of the outside world—she could study, but she didn’t need to make a career out of it. She was encouraged to go to school, even allowed to choose a major of her liking. But not for her own becoming. Not for the joy of learning or the power of thinking for herself. She was told it would help her raise smarter children in the future, assist with their homework, and speak confidently to their teachers. That it might even save her husband a buck or two on a tutor someday. The scroll made sure she knew those who were yet to enter her life: an unidentified man and her unborn children, who always came before her, before she even met them.

The commandment that followed came cloaked in encouragement. She was told she could create—paint, draw, express—but only if it served a purpose beyond pleasure. Art for art’s sake was a luxury reserved for others. So she stitched and crocheted and embroidered and hemmed, needles pricking her thumbs, blood staining the thread, sweat trickling down her forehead and staining the fabric and yet, she did not stop adorning bodies and warming homes—her own and others’—shaping the very fabric of the world that refused to see her as a creator in her own right.

Degrees and hobbies were welcomed. Ambition, however, was not. Curiosity was tolerated, but dreams were quietly crushed. After all, wasn’t it a known fact that a woman’s earnings didn’t stretch the way a man’s did? That her success always came at a cost? Education and hobbies, too, came with conditions.

Another commandment followed quietly into the kitchen, where the worth of a woman was measured in cumin seeds and coriander leaves. But it wasn’t enough to cook. The food had to *look* right before it could *taste* right. The *roti* had to be round. The curry had to shine

with oil, just enough. The coriander had to be fresh and scattered just so. Anything less brought shame—not just on herself, but upon her mother’s upbringing.

And then came the rule she was never taught, only expected to obey: *be agreeable, even when you disagree*. She learned to smile and nod when elders spoke, even when the words tangled uncomfortably inside her. She learned to stay quiet at the dinner table, to avoid asking questions that might ruffle egos or raise eyebrows. To keep the peace. To not make things awkward. Disagreement was called disrespect. Afterall, *a girl with too many opinions would be a burden to love*. So she tucked away her questions. Smoothed out her reactions. She trained her face into pleasant neutrality, even when her thoughts screamed for air. And slowly, she forgot the sound of her voice when it said no.

A large chunk of the scroll focused on life after marriage, with its own silent syllabus. His parents had now gained a daughter, hers, on the other hand, had lost theirs. She was expected to serve—not her husband alone, but everyone who shared his blood. And she was expected to do it all with grace: to smile through the ache, hide the bruises in the heart, and swallow every last tear like they were some shameful secrets. She learned quickly that her pain was not hers to share. Not with her mother, not with her friend, not with the woman next door, who, she realised later, was fighting the same battle. A good woman, the scroll indicated, was nothing if not thorough in the deception of her pain.

For a long time, she thought she was alone in it. The quiet crying. The silent screaming in her head. The way grief sat on her chest like a stone. But then she began noticing it in other women too. In the way they snapped at the smallest things. In their tired eyes. In their sharp tongues and tight silences. In the way they stirred milk and sugar in the tea too hard. Slammed plates just a little louder than needed. In the

way they moved through the world like they were carrying something heavier than their hands could hold. And she understood the consequences of being silenced far too much, for far too long. When no one gives you space to scream, the silence leaks out anyway—through clenched jaws, broken conversations, brittle kindness. Through fatigue no sleep can heal.

And then one day, holding her own children—a boy and a girl—in her arms, something inside her stirred. She looked at her daughter and made a vow: no one will ever sell her the scroll of lies she was handed. Not wrapped in love. Not disguised as tradition. Not even whispered softly. And she looked at her son, and prayed that if a woman ever enters his life clutching that same sacred scroll, he will help her burn it.

Because love does not come to the desirable, it comes to the *free*.