



# PIDE

*Conversation*

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## A Conversation with Sania Saeed

### Who would you include in the elite group?

There is an elite in every group, class, profession and political structure. I think the general understanding of the elite, is a small group of people who have control of economic resources, opportunities, decision-making processes, policymaking processes, and the impact, implementation and benefits of these processes. I also believe that elite of any field, including the seemingly progressive ones, are a small group of people usurping maximum resources and its benefits, and would never be good. So, no matter how fancy it sounds, it is not right, it will never be.

### Do you believe elite capture is an issue in Pakistan?

Elite capture will always be a problem in societies based on class, caste, feudalistic, ethnic and capitalist divides. These systems are in place to produce and socially and politically protect the elite. Pakistan is also a rare case where you find the most unique type of elite: an invisible one. The one that controls the maximum resources, the one that has the most power, the one that embodies the absolutist political agency. The one which manipulates the system the most. It had remained invisible for the last 40-50 years, but not anymore. So, the problem here is that if you cannot name them, if you cannot single them out, if you cannot put a finger on them, how are you going to solve the issue? Civilian and dictatorial elite are of course the major problems. No matter how much you challenge and question them, they always blame each other. They cannot exist without each other as they serve each other's interests. While doing so, they ensure they both flourish. They need each other for the blame game. Secondly, when everything goes astray, the public is purposefully divided to create chaos. And it serves the purpose, because in the end neither you nor I will make any sense of it. In the end, nobody will be answerable, no one will be held accountable. Here, you won't find a clear-cut capitalistic system, not a clear-cut feudalistic system, or a clear-cut dictatorial system. This lack of clarity for the people is carefully manufactured by the powerful. So, elite capture is the issue in Pakistan.

### Have you ever interacted with elites in your life? If yes, how have those interactions been?

I grew up not liking them. Knowing well that all the problems of the people were solvable if they would not capture more than their share of resources. No FOMO if I don't interact with them but it is quite



impossible, isn't it? I, in my own small way, work to oppose these forces, however possible. Times when interactions with the economic elite are inevitable, I have found their apathy quite disgusting and their disassociation with reality and shameless show of wealth and power quite distasteful.

### Has your body of work as a street theatre artist and TV/Film actor ever been resisted by the elites and how have you shown resistance to the social structures through your work?

Of course. It is quite interesting though, that one section of the elite, custodians of culture, literature etc. are patrons of the arts and the other section opposes it, but if art starts criticizing what's protecting them, they align fast. In theatre, we were talking about the system of unequal division of resources, which is why the elite exists. So, yes there was resistance. And how do they resist? They threaten you. They don't permit you. They censor your content. They don't make cultural spaces accessible, financially and culturally. They don't give you space in the news. All the reviews we ever got were because of individuals' own interests. We had no networking skills, and we didn't want to because that's what we were performing against. If I was to compromise my content to get an auditorium or a discount it would kill my purpose. Our performance at the PACC was once almost jeopardized by an excise officer demanding, and extorting money from us after our play had already started. I had to go sort it out during my time off stage. He threatened to shut the play down even though we had all the papers. We made no money on that play. If you have a group like mine, you choose to perform on the streets or in small towns and villages and auditoriums. You lose out on a lot, but it is what it is and it has a cost. So, you work consistently and build to be stronger and not so easy to shut down.

### What is merit?

Merit is a gauge societies develop to train and enable individuals to maintain systems and status quo. It can mean different things to different people though. The system says a person achieving a certain percentage in their exams is a person worthy of position, wealth or power. A person who is reproducing books prescribed by the system is assessed on a scale devised by the system and facilitated to adjust in the system, to maintain the system. The person is thinking and doing what has been programmed to do and not necessarily what is required to solve a problem. To others, merit could mean free thinking, resisting greed, strategizing to do what is in the best interest of people at large. Do not expect to change anything if you are to judge people and yourself on the standard that the gatekeeper elite, as you call it, has set because they are decided by them to keep their systems in place and to meet their purpose. Really good students with high percentages rarely do groundbreaking work, because they have been indoctrinated well and that is how they have achieved high marks. They know what you want to hear and they say it. It keeps them cozy and well-adjusted. It is mediocre students who are often the chain breakers because they could be learning a lot more than from the prescribed books and from multiple sources. They might be able to think out of the box and their answers may not always please you.

How do you train CSS officers? The ones who are up to your 'merit', you train them for months and years to be the elite. You train them to behave like rulers, to exploit, to manipulate. It's all part of the training, on which millions are spent. Similarly, in the army what do they train you for? They train you to never say no. You can be the best cadet because you never say no. How is this merit? They ask you to kill children and you kill children. How is this merit? So, it depends on how society defines merit. And if you think that the elite is the cream of the human resource and has risen because of capability, I would say, "No".

### So, you don't think that meritocracy can be an alternative to the gatekeeping elitist system?

How quickly do the meritocratic elite become the gatekeepers? I will give you a week. They would turn into a gatekeeping elite in less than that time. You have set the merit to rise to that power and the power is of the gatekeepers. They train the people on merit to be gatekeepers. You are misunderstanding merit here. That is why I am saying question merit, you are asking the wrong question. The meritocratic elite is trained to become a gatekeeping elite. The question is, merit according to whom? Merit, according to the gatekeep

-er. The people of this country, including my friends genuinely believe, how is the system to work otherwise? So, you have not only trained the elite to be the elite but also the common man to be the passive subject to that elite. Have you seen how the protocol staff behave and function for their bureaucrat masters? Have you had interactions with the bureaucratic elite in their official spaces? How they look down upon you? How long they keep you waiting for fundraising and charity events? It's nauseatingly ugly. I don't see any difference between the hawari of a feudal lord and them. All your bureaucracy is seeded in this feudalistic mindset. All of it, 100 per cent. They expect you to serve just like a feudal expects his hawari, his mazara, his kisan, his mureed to be subservient to him. They consider themselves kings. They don't expect disobedience. If you disagree, they get upset. They have been trained to never be challenged. It is part of their 'meritorious' training. To me both meritocracy and gatekeeping elitism are the same that is why we talk about revolution and not a reform because who will bring about this reform? The same meritorious elites who have been trained to the merit decided by the gatekeeping elite. So anybody with any different ideas will be rejected on 'merit'. A democratic organization,



**Our system is neither clear-cut capitalist, nor feudalistic or dictatorial; this lack of clarity is carefully manufactured by the ruling elite in Pakistan to create chaos among the masses.**



if there is a democratic organization left in this country at all, would say it is okay to say no, explain your reasons, I will give you my reasons, and even after that if you don't want to agree on a matter, you are most welcome not to. Militaries and bureaucracies do not function like that. They believe the system manufactured by them is the only system that works and that is the only system that should exist. Whatever they learn from foreign training is rarely implemented here because they want to live off the existing system, they cannot afford it to change. They do the same with the business elite. Businesses must collude with them to survive. If you don't they will not give you gas, electricity and water. They go hand in hand. As long as they do their part they will not be questioned, no matter how much toxic waste they dump in the rivers and seas and drinking water, how many trees they cut, no matter how much carbon emits from their industries, what labor laws are broken, how much cultivatable land is turned into residential societies? Will these business elite ever be answerable? To whom? To policymakers? Who are the policymakers? The meritocratic elite! Who are the meritocratic? The ones manufactured by the gatekeeping elite! It's a vicious cycle.

You very well know what happened to the intellectual rebels. The ones that could not be scared or bought are either dead or exiled. Today, the weakest elite is the intellectual elite of Pakistan.

And the new found religious elite! The colonizers were spot on in deducing that if this region is to be controlled, use religion as an instrument and design a powerful elite. They have repeatedly shown that they will not be controlled, even by their creators.

Despite some strong resistance and political awakening and movements in some parts of the country a large number of people remain apolitical or have no ideological positions. They are still hero worshippers waiting for Gadot.

The 'meritocratic' elite will be at the receiving end of this oppression though, sooner or later. I am afraid of the anarchy and chaos that will bring. If there can be more.

### **Is there elite capture in the media industry?**

It is a multi-faceted capture. Your media is 100 per cent business-run. TV channel owners today are people who had nothing to do with art or creativity. They are business people. So the financial resource dominates content. They have taken complete charge of how and what goes on air. To me that's capture of creative resource. They also don't think they need to be

responsible for what they feed their audience.

News channels were run by newspapers. Resistance that journalists showed in the papers reduced with TV news channels. They started earning exorbitant amounts of money. If you can't be bought you will be thrown out or worse, fairies will abduct you. A new breed of nonstop talkers took over. We all now know who controls them. That's capture of our fundamental right of information which to me is resource. Now these are the people recognized as the elite in media. They run the show, they make the rules.

### **What about the entertainment industry?**

In the entertainment industry, you are dependent on sponsors. These sponsors are your everyday commodities, who need minds that can be easily exploited. If entertainment helps me be an independent woman who makes independent decisions, why would I have a complex about my hair? I won't have a complex about my skin type and tone. If I don't have such complexes, I won't buy your skincare products, soaps and shampoos. But if I have developed such fears, what would I do to fit into the standards of a prototype woman? I will start cooking food in a particular brand of oil because that's what makes a mother popular, the one who buys pampers, the one who prepares specific drinks in Ramadan, who is part of a household care economy, subservient to the household needs. First they manufacture prototypes, and then they feed off those prototypes.

They construct the drama narrative around this prototype. This elite has captured the narrative and narrative is a crucial resource. Through this narrative, they have captured your complex mindsets. Such narrative controllers won't propel stories where a woman is happy earning independently, a widow or a divorcee who is doing well for herself and her children, whose children are successful. Such uplifting stories of women are missing. I guess their focus groups must have shown happy women don't buy beauty products or gold as much to prove their self-worth. Our people want to see such stories. These are the people for whom the merit of good and bad has been constructed. Good and bad human beings, good and bad women, good and bad households, acceptable family structures, and morally upright behaviors. Who has ascertained these merits? The same gatekeepers have.

**In entertainment industry the narrative is a resource which unfortunately has been captured by the sponsors!**

### Has the journey been difficult?

If I can be completely honest, not so much for me. It would have been if I didn't have supportive family and comrades, who defined success differently. My friends at work joke sometimes that most people make a career by saying yes to jobs, I have made mine by saying no. It is 32 years of saying no to what I did not agree with. I have commuted to shoots on busses and rickshaws, did odd jobs, voiceovers, write, so that I could say no. I had to work double and triple as much to be able to say no. I limited my needs, lived a rather unglamorous life so I could say no to lucrative projects but stories I didn't want to tell. It has taken a village to frame this mindset and keep me secure.

### Any parting thoughts?

I have survived in this industry by sticking to what not to do. If you skim through the weakest of the scripts I have been associated with, it does not glorify decadent, regressive ideas. In its weakest, smallest unpopular way it has still pushed for honest conversations that take us forward. I will always do a less 'popular in the masses' Sang-e-Mah, Raqeeb Se, Aseerzadi and Sang-e-Marmar as compared to a khirhki torh TRP regressive play, the elite of this sector or any other can want whatever they want. And that is the least we can do.

**32 years of saying no to regressive narratives has made me the artist I am today. I have commuted to shoots on buses & rickshaws, did odd jobs, voiceovers & write so that I could say 'no'.**

**Have you seen how the protocol staff behave & function for their bureaucrat masters? I don't see any difference in the hawari of a feudal lord & them. The bureaucracy is seeded in this feudalistic mindset!**

