

Welcome to Pakistan, Sania!
By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

The temptation to write about the Shoaib Malik/Sania Mirza union is difficult to resist. Fame, fortune, cross-border love, deception and betrayal are enough to turn a Bollywood flick into a blockbuster. But if the story unfolds in real life, it is impossible to expect the media not to obsess over it.

Apart from the fact that Shoaib seems to have an across-the-border fetish, and that we will probably never really know the truth about Ayesha Siddiqui, his decision to settle down with Sania is not one that can be faulted. “Bad boy” Shoaib seems to have picked a really good girl. A pretty and internationally recognized tennis star, Sania has been an Indian icon ever since she was eighteen.

Sania’s choice, on the other hand, has ruffled more than a few feathers on the Indian side. With the Shiv Sena chief claiming that “had her heart been Indian, it wouldn’t have beaten for a Pakistani,” and Indian bloggers vowing to boycott products she endorses, suffice it to say that Sania’s decision to settle down with Shoaib has called into question her patriotism.

While some have tried to portray this as a “love conquers all” cross-cultural marriage that will break down barriers and soothe the omnipresent India-Pakistan rift, others have focused on the gender issue. Pakistanis are not as perturbed about the union because of the idea of male conquest, runs the argument. Had it been a Pakistani woman and an Indian man, sentiments would have been different, some contend. “Would the reaction have been the same if Mahendra Dhoni decided to marry Naseem Hameed?” asks Amber Rahim Shamsi in her blog in Dawn.

But I’m not so sure that is the question to ask. Rather, would the reaction have been any different if Naseem Hameed decided to marry Irfan Pathan? Personally, I doubt it. This is less about gender and more about religion and identity. Heady romance aside, who we choose to marry, does say something about how we define ourselves. The fact that both Sania and Shoaib have only considered Muslims as potential spouses suggests that their religion is very important to them. Discovered in the Inzamam years, when the image of the Pakistani cricketer had transformed from the nightclub-frequenting playboy into a beard-sporting *namazi*, in Shoaib’s case, this is hardly surprising. However, Sania’s decision seems to have been a rude awakening to many in India.

This in spite of the fact that Sania, like most accomplished Muslim women, had to overcome criticism from orthodox groups who found her tennis attire objectionable and unsuited to their narrow interpretation of religion. Yet unlike Irshad Manji or Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Sania Mirza refuses to reject her community and does not let the unlearned interpretations of others affect her own Islamic identity. Just as ill-thought out *fatwas* from untutored men project Islam as a backward religion, so too there are efforts to rob Islamic youth of its role models by depicting Islam as the exclusive domain of regressive attitudes. Lobbies promoting such ideas can be found in both the western world and in India. They are eager to portray emancipated Muslim women as disowned by their own community and desperately seeking refuge outside of Islamic societies in order to pursue their worldly interests.

Sania is a slap in the face of such notions. Not only was she supported in her tennis career by her Muslim family in Hyderabad, but after reaching great heights while playing for India, she decided to marry a Muslim and a Pakistani, of her own accord. Moreover, when Shoaib Malik and his mother were questioned by the media on her future tennis prospects and apparel, they stood by her decision to choose.

Sania is no longer just an Indian icon. She is more importantly a role model for Muslim women. Because Sania is Muslim, women in Pakistan will relate to her far more easily. The fact that Shoaib and Sania are choosing a neutral Dubai as their future home and agreeing to play for their respective countries goes to show that the two have given thought to the idea of equality in a marriage. This is not about male conquest or outmoded concepts of *ghairat* as Firdous Ashiq Awan touted on a talk show recently. This is about greater equality in the Muslim marriage and empowerment of women within the realm of Islam. And for this reason alone, Sania Mirza’s marriage to Shoaib and hence affiliation with Pakistan is very welcome.

