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Features

May 15-21, 2009 | Vol. XXI, No. 13

The happiest women

Taymour Soomro recounts a rural tragedy

The happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history," writes George Eliot (née Mary Ann Evans) in *The Mill on the Floss*, the (necessarily tragic) history of Maggie Tulliver. Pakistan seems to prove her right for the wrong reasons. The fates of our leaders read like the popular mnemonic for Henry VIII's wives. Assassinated, dismissed, resigned. Take your pick. Our twenty-third prime minister was the first to complete a full term. The unpleasantly rich history of an unhappy nation, then. The women of Pakistan fare considerably better though, if, as per Eliot, their welfare is inversely proportional to the space they occupy in our public narrative. They have no history at all. But I'm not sure Eliot provides a mathematical equation. In the context, it reads more like a comment on the constraints of her time.

"Since the days of Hecuba and Hector," she explains, women were perpetually "inside the gates watching the world's combat from afar, filling their long, empty days with memories and fears." They were the chorus, never the protagonist. Pakistan's faceless fifty percent are relegated to a similarly ancillary role. If they perform as cast, they're invisible: cogs in a machine – you only notice them when they break. That isn't to say they have no story to tell, only that they have no voice with which to tell it. Some of the grossest tragedies – the Mukhtaran Mais and Chand Bibis – may qualify for attention, but the subtle oppressions that deny women autonomy or individual identity, that cover their faces, that keep them uneducated, belong to a misogyny so pervasive that it is convention.

In Jacobabad, theirs is a strange, silent population: invisible in the city – tossed, tumbled sacks on the backs of rickshaws or carts, fleeting shadows on passage walls. But reach the outskirts and they glitter in the fields, at the heads or tails of black snake trails of buffalo, in vivid clusters in village clearings. Here,



Women in rural areas are denied autonomy and mobility



Pakistani women: searching for identity



Woman by Duriya Kazi

they may be the workforce but they're not much freer for it: the haris' haris. "Control over a woman is the only form of dominance most men possess, for most men are merely subjects of more powerful men," Marilyn French notes in *From Eve to Dawn: A History of Women*. The rural community exaggerates that dichotomy and arguably that exercise of control, though any such evaluation is hindered by a lack of access. They can't tell us their stories, and we can't tell them either. I can tell you the little I've seen firsthand – but that's my story.

On a recent trip, a member of our retinue, S, asked for my grandfather's help in resolving a family matter. His sister left home several months ago with a man from a town some distance away. S took her back by force, but a month later she left again and on this occasion they were married. It was described to me as a court marriage, meaning one that was legally binding but without the greater legitimacy community participation would have given. S's objection to the union was threefold. By her own admission, he said, her husband beat her. Moreover, it was widely reported that he drank wine and gambled. "He took one of ours," S said, "so I will take three of theirs." He had not had the opportunity to effect this plan as yet when he approached my grandfather with a request that he mediate between the parties. It is too late for this, someone said to me in an aside. If her value were this before, he gestured with his arms, it is this, he gestured with his fingers, now that the nikkah is done.

We visited the new in-laws' tribal elder, who happened to be a friend and supporter of my grandfather's and lived in a village in nearby N_____. He insisted we join him for breakfast, which turned out to be brain, roast chicken, bhindi, fried potatoes, parathas and, (for me, I suppose) chicken nuggets, boiled peas and chips. Then, we sat in his drawing room, in front of a giant painting of a man with a moustache and a turban, and he and my grandfather talked at length. I will ask her, my grandfather said, whether she is happy. I will ask her five times, he may have said. If she wishes to stay with her husband, she should be allowed to. And if she wishes to leave, he must let her. A scrawny cat wandered through a chink in the door into the hallway and then, a little later, out. A boy stared in and grinned at us and over his shoulder at someone in the hot afternoon behind him. S was summoned. He spoke animatedly but seemed ultimately in agreement. We would come back later that week when his sister and her husband would be present.

During the week, my grandfather was asked on two further occasions to mediate in disputes concerning women. In fact, our return journey to N_____ was delayed by the attempted resolution of a dispute of precisely this nature. At a point near the turn-off for N_____, the road was obstructed by a disorderly collection of men and policemen and police vehicles askew. We skirted them and after a short distance, were halted by another cavalry. A hundred or more Pathans with long beards and Kalashnikovs had assembled at the head of a convoy of cars parked two or three wide for another hundred yards along a road. There was no space for skirting. On either side, the road disappeared into a trench. My grandfather shouted the driver on, and as we inched forward, the crowd pressed in around us and raised their weapons across their chests. Someone emerged from the group and tapped at my grandfather's window. A tribe of Buriros had seized one of their girls, he said. They had promised to return her today and the Sindhi Pathans had summoned Pathans from across the border for support and gathered here to enforce that pledge. He shouted and waved at the cars, and with some measure of grim-faced reluctance they let us pass.

At N_____, S's sister and her husband had not yet arrived. We waited and when they called a second time, it seemed they were lost and we drove along to find them. The sun was suspended perfectly ahead, so close to the fields that every grain of barley gleamed, and the herons in a suddenly scattering flock flashed silver wings. We crossed a village

and, by a haystack where the tarmac became rubble, we saw in a cloud of dust a battered Corolla approaching from a distance and turned back. Across a sharp bend in the road I caught a glimpse in the rear window of a huddled white burka. The sun had disappeared. The sky was a grey fog and birds were reeling and swarming overhead. I wondered whether we should be on the roads at night.

In the house, we shut the front doors and she was brought in from the back. She lifted her burka over her head and seemed very small underneath, though it did not seem appropriate to look very closely. My grandfather explained why he had come and asked her what she wanted to do. "I want to stay with my husband." She stared at the floor. "Why did you tell your family you were unhappy and wanted to leave?" he asked. "I didn't," she said. "Why did you call them and tell them your husband beats you and drinks wine," he asked. "That isn't true," she said. "I never called them." "You're happy where you are?" he asked. "Yes." "You shouldn't have run away," he said. "That was wrong," she replied. "Forgive me." "What do you want me to do?" he asked. "Forgive me," she said. He told me to fetch S. He came from the maidan outside and sat beside her. My grandfather explained what had happened. "It is tension," he said. "Her husband is a gambler, a wine-drinker, a drug-taker." My grandfather asked her again what she wanted to do. "I want to stay with my husband." S pulled his chair closer and turned to face her. He addressed her directly and she began to cry. I stared at the floor. "Does your husband gamble?" S asked his sister. "No." "Does he drink wine?" "No," very quietly, wiping tears away. "See her tension!" he exclaimed. "That is the evidence. "Ask any man who knows her husband and he'll tell you he drinks wine and gambles. Then you'll know she isn't telling the truth."

My grandfather excused himself to say his prayers. I stood too and S took my arm and stopped me. He told her who I was, that I was her elder. "We are poor people," he said, "but look at this." He pulled at her burka, gestured at her kameez. "We would take better care of her." Underneath, her hands were clenching fabric in fists. My grandfather called her to another room. He spoke with her briefly. They returned. "She wants to stay with her husband," he said. "That is her wish." S began arguing loudly. My grandfather asked her again what she wanted to do and she repeated that she wanted to stay with her husband. S stood up and left the room, struggling for a moment at the door, which wouldn't open. His sister replaced her burka and turned to leave. My grandfather called her back, touched her head and she knelt at his feet. "God keep you happy," he said. We drove home on unlit, broken roads.

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