A Comparative Exploration of the Depictions of Punjabi Women in Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* and *Now We Are Monsters*

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Abstract

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By critically analyzing three short stories (Saleema, Provide Provide and In Other Rooms Other Wonders) from Daniyal Mueenuddin's collection *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* this essay aims to explore the parallels and differences between his work and my own collection of short stories that comprised my MFA thesis at the University of Washington. The essay aims to assess the themes and narratives revolving around women's lives and experiences in Pakistan as depicted in Mueenuddin's fiction, and how my own fiction builds on as well as resists them. By engaging with multiple research papers by Pakistani scholars such as Fatima Ali, Omama Tanvir and Anila Afzal, I assess Mueenuddin's women characters and how they can inform my own fiction that unfolds in a similar sociopolitical context in rural Punjab. This is as much a comment on Mueenuddin's work as it is an exercise in discovering and closely scrutinizing my own creative process and voice.

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I first came across Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* a decade ago. The stories in this collection revolve around characters that populate a feudal landowner K. K. Harouni's mansion in Lahore and haveli in his ancestral village Dunyapur on the banks of Indus. Daniyal's descriptions of munshis, cooks, valets, drivers and maids, and the way he captures the minutest detail of their body language, appearance, and mannerisms was fascinating; I had never read these characters from rural Punjab brought to life in such vivid and breathtaking detail. He also had a great knack for translating dialogue in such a way that he completely abandoned the original Punjabi expressions but still somehow preserved their cadence and sharpness; I finally had a model for what Punjabi to English dialogue translated well might look, sound, and feel like.

I felt grateful seeing my world represented with such accuracy. My family, like K K Harouni, has owned lands in rural Punjab, albeit by the banks of Chenab rather than Indus. We also have considerably less land, power and status than Harounis, but I still found the rigid class divide and caste system apparent in Mueenuddin's work wholly relatable. In his short *"*About a Burning Girl" Mueenuddin switches to a first person narrator and writes from the point of view of a judge dealing with a puzzling murder case. My happiness started to give way to a feeling of resentment, for my own father was a judge too, and the story he wrote was again something too similar to what I might have written in the future. It felt a little unfair, and the feeling of relief at having found something so relatable to read turned to a feeling of dread that only creatives know, the *oh shit* sinking feeling you get when you realize: somebody *got there* first.

His characters, dramatic situations, the world within which they were functioning and the kinds of plots he was so effortlessly weaving, I could easily see myself coming up with them in my late twenties. I was just a teenager when I first read the book but even then I had aspirations

to write. I knew I'd get better if I kept my eyes open and pen running. But here was a man in his mid-forties who had already covered all that ground. Like intellectuals wanting to say something new, true and revelatory, creatives have a similar urge to reveal something never before seen; they have an itch to document what's being lost, to bring to a language a world that's wholly novel to that language as it has never been rendered in it in that way before. Similarly, a part of me knew I wanted to be a bridge, a portal. Not to pander, or become Spivak's native informant, but to preserve and make more real in language what's so necessary and vital to my being.

I finished the book, sighed, put it aside, and never read it again. I kept pushing it into the hands of people who would ask me for a Pakistani book recommendation, or wonder aloud what my village was like. At first my friends all liked it. They found Mueenuddin's language pristine, his plots compelling, and characters well drawn. They asked me questions about certain things, and I felt good acting like an authority on all things Punjabi, speculating about character motivations and revealing important cultural contexts to better their understanding of some of the stories. However, in recent years, I recommended the book to a couple of friends, but their response was at best lukewarm. They didn't really say why. I began to wonder if I should revisit it after all and got the chance to do it for this essay recently.

I'm glad I did. I realized upon this reread that it is distinctly possible to hold onto an idea of an artwork – one informed by your appreciation of it during a certain period of your life when you first came in contact with it – and to fail to scrutinize it in light of what you have learned, seen and lived through ever since. While I still held onto my admiration for Mueenuddin's language, worldbuilding, and ability to portray vast socio-political realities through a few deft details, I found his portrayal of Punjabi women to be in need of more complexity and multidimensionality.

Before diving into a discussion of the three stories I will be closely engaging with from the collection, it may help to briefly provide a synopsis of each for context. The first story “Saleema” is about a woman named Saleema who comes under the employment of one K K Harouni, a retired civil servant and a feudal landlord with a mansion in Lahore and a haveli in Dunyapur, a Punjabi village. Saleema tries to sleep with different male servants of the household, including the cook, before she settles for the old valet Rafik who is kind to her. When she has a child with him he too abandons her, and with the death of K K Harouni the story ends with her out on the streets, begging on the sidewalk, her and Rafik’s child in arms. The second story “Provide Provide” unfolds around the same setting and characters, but instead it is Harouni’s corrupt land manager Jaglani who takes in a driver’s financially struggling, already married, sister and has an affair with her. He dies in the end and she too is left to fend for herself on the roads. The third story “In Other Rooms Other Wonders' revolves around a young woman Husna, a distant, poorer relative of Harouni arriving at his Lahore house to find a job. He employs her, has an affair with her, and then passes away in a heart attack one day, leaving her nothing. She too is left heartbroken, with a lot of hardships ahead of her.

In the three stories with women characters as protagonists, Mueenuddin paints a bleak and hopeless picture of a rural Punjab fraught with peril around every corner for these women, and he makes them all sleep with older, wealthier, powerful men to gain some semblance of security and success in life. In the short story “Saleema” Mueenuddin writes, “Saleema knew that he [the cook] was through with her, would sweeten up and try to fuck her now and then, out of cruelty as much as anything else, to show he could—but the easy days were over, now she had no one to protect her” (Mueenuddin 31). In "Provide Provide" when Jaglani, the land manager, asks Zainab if she’s afraid other villagers will find out about their affair she says, “The villagers!

They knew the first night. They leave me alone because they're afraid of you. It's nice, it's proof of just how much they fear you. If you dropped me they would call me a whore out loud as I walked down the street" (Mueenuddin 70). In the titular story "In Other Rooms Other Wonders" when Husna notices jewels and glamorous objects in the city, "Husna's mind would hang on these symbols of wealth not letting go for hours. She sensed that all this might come to her through Harouni if she became his mistress" (Mueenuddin 122).

If this were a story or two, one could understand it as an isolated, solitary, realistic depiction of very probable events giving us a peek into one aspect of the patriarchal feudal system of rural Punjab, but the repetitive and tedious tropes *all* of Mueenuddin's women characters fall prey to repeatedly in so many of his stories say so much more about his limited understanding of Punjabi women's resilience and resourcefulness in face of hardship brought on by rampant misogyny than their objective reality. Instead of being an insight into this world, these stories become a one-dimensional worldview of an outsider looking in with a certain sense of well-meaning but misguided empathy and ill-informed fascination. In her deconstructive feminist reading of Mueenuddin's story Saleema, published in University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics and Literature, Tanvir observes: "The stereotypical portrayal of women in literature asserts the weak, submissive and irrational tendencies in their nature. The mistreatment of females at the hands of the male members of the society is highlighted in literary works from which generalizations are drawn. In his short stories, Pakistani writer Daniyal Mueenuddin portrays a very bleak picture of Pakistani society which has caught western readers' attention. His female characters are either too weak, oppressed or they have no moral standing" (Tanvir 66).

Saleema sleeps with the cook before getting dumped for the sweepress. “Saleema next angled for one of the drivers - forlorn hope!” Finally she manages to seduce the much older valet Rafik to get some semblance of respect from the other male staff at Harouni’s mansion. Anila Afzal in her analysis of Mueenuddin and Qaisra Shahraz’s work notices many instances of Saleema being objectified in Mueenuddin’s language: “In Mueenuddin's (2009) Saleema we find many such inferences which have gender bias against women. While describing Saleema, the writer says, at fourteen, she became the plaything of a small landowner’s son implying that when a man and a woman have illicit relationship with each other it is the woman who is to be regarded as the plaything reducing her to level of an object” (Afzal 48). Like Saleema’s love interest Rafik, Jaglani in "Provide Provide", we are told, has peasants' wives throwing themselves at him and he takes whoever he pleases. Zainab in "Provide Provide" has to sleep with this old manager Jaglani before being abandoned by him in the wake of Jaglani’s cancer diagnosis. Not only does Jaglani move to the city to his actual family and forget about her, Mueenuddin too conveniently treats her as a discardable character by moving onto other themes he seems more excited to explore, questions of inheritance and his son’s struggle to remain politically powerful after Jalglani’s demise. In “In Other Rooms Other Wonders” Husna has no other personal aspirations than to sleep her way up, and again we are treated to the same story of a young woman trying to get in bed with an old man for power.

All these attempts end in tragedy, with Harouni and Jaglani dying and Rafik simply abandoning Saleema. Other characters are then made to pronounce the final verdict: The cook Hassan in "Saleema" says “you came with nothing you leave with nothing. There never *was* any hope” (Mueenuddin 59). Similarly, in “In Other Rooms Other Wonders”, Harouni’s daughter Sarwat says to Husna after Harouni’s death “there was and is nothing for you” (Mueenuddin

141). Zainab in “Provide Provide” is turned away when she finally appears at Jaglani’s city house, led by his son out the house and onto the street where she stands alone crying over how she wasn’t even offered tea. When these men’s actual, older wives get to know about their infidelity, they don’t seem to do anything. Rafik’s wife in "Saleema" simply joins him at the Harouni mansion in Lahore and sulks in her room to the point that even Saleema wishes for a reaction: “she would much rather have been attacked, for then she could react” (Mueenuddin 56). She is someone who is shown to have a lot of power over Rafik, having been her partner for decades, and even without her complaints Rafik is so full of guilt and regret at betraying her that he breaks up with Zainab, and yet she is not seen making any demands of him.

Similarly, when Jaglani’s wife gets to know about him and his mistress Zainab in "Provide Provide", “she became old, she prayed a great deal, spent much of her time in bed, stopped caring for herself. Her body became rounded like a hoop, not fat but fleshed uniformly all over, a body thrown away, throwing itself away” (Mueenuddin 86). Jaglani’s wife again is someone Jaglani has borne children with, son Mustafa who is a stern man and would take a stand for her if need be. But the story shies away from giving her any semblance of agency in this regard, and she is again made to suffer and rot. Despite these men being duty bound to their wives and children, and despite the possibility of society’s judgement for abandoning one’s lawful family weighing heavily upon these men’s conscience, none of the women take advantage of this leverage in any way. Instead, when women are not busy throwing themselves at men, they’re seen throwing themselves away for losing one. Tanvir, in her analysis of the story Saleema, goes as far as to notice that “She is not as vulnerable and oppressed as one may perceive her to be, neither is she a weak woman who could so easily be used and manipulated by others. Rather she is the one who uses and manipulates others to gain personal benefits” and

concludes that the stories themselves have evidence in certain places that the female characters are actually way more in control than they are given the liberty within the narrative to be, that despite showing glimpses of what strong material they are made of, they are never given the opportunity to shine and show this side of themselves, or to use it to liberate themselves. Mueenuddin seems to shun this resourcefulness in favor of narrative that reaffirms women's place in this society as being helplessly hopeless.

It may be argued that in each of these stories, the stories have been engineered in such a way that given the unique cast of characters and their very specific socio-economic conditions and power relations, it makes sense for these women to not exert any power for their rights. Although this argument may stand true in some cases as Mueenuddin is really good at defining and explaining all character motivations, it is with the larger project of the story collection as a whole that I take issue. What does it mean for a man writing a book of stories to only see women, in all his stories about women, as hopelessly oppressed, tortured, subjugated? They sure are, in many cases they're worse off than Mueenuddin portrays them, but my unease stems from his creative choice to write and relay only those stories/narratives to illustrate a one-dimensional view of women's experience in a particular society, devoid of any variation or nuance.

This criticism does not stem from a misguided will to see the positive in a decaying society; I'm merely concerned that the lack of dimensionality and nuance in the depiction of Punjabi women in a collection is a disservice to the women who populate this place. All three stories, without fail, follow the same formula: A poor thinly drawn woman character trying to seduce an elder, more powerful man, succeeding, then getting ruined because he dies or abandons her. There is no nuance to the exploration of the nature of women's plights in Punjab, and he does not challenge the patriarchal status quo in any way by introducing fresh, bold,

memorable Punjabi women characters whose life may not rely solely around men, let alone pass metrics such as the Bechdel Test which proposes that for a work to be non sexist it needs to feature 1) at least two women 2) who talk to each other in at least one scene 3) about anything other than a man (Neville). All of these three stories mostly feature women either fighting other women, or vying for the favor of a man. There is no room for female economy of care or affection, something that is prevalent in south asia in the form of the "Saheli" culture, or female friendship. Now these homosocial environments for women too are born to oppose patriarchy and thrive because of their collective hate for the other, but there is tenderness and agency they lend which is simply not present or visible in Mueenuddin's idea and conception of the Punjabi female experience.

Fatima Ali, in her analysis of female characters in Pakistani contemporary short stories, argues, "Literature and especially Pakistani literature suggests a clear division between masculine and feminine gender roles. This division seems to be existing since time immemorial and it enhances gender differences and inequality between both sexes" (Ali 5) This is not only a question of depicting reality as it is but contesting a certain image of the state of society as historically built and reinforced by Pakistani literature to a point that it teeters on misrepresentation of the lived experience of a certain gender belonging to a certain class to a point of becoming a self fulfilling prophecy. Is there no space for a single story out of the many in *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* to portray a side of Punjabi women that speaks to their strong spirit, their resourcefulness without resorting to help from men, and their reliance upon the members of their own gender for care and security?

"Initially, these differences are supposed to be innate. Men should behave in a masculine way and females in a feminine manner. Thus, society has expectations of acceptable behavior

from both sides on the basis of prescribed rules for possible masculine and feminine behaviors. And with the passage of time, this societal prescription takes the form and status of a norm. Any deviation is strongly contested and denied; then, these norms lead human beings to sexual stereotyping in almost all spheres of life; male is the breadwinner for the 6 whole household and female has the typical role of being mother and caretaker for the whole household" (Ali 6). To what extent do artists of a place add and contribute to an understanding of this societal structure and hierarchy as being fixed, rigid and hopeless? I feel we have a responsibility as men to write narratives about women that challenge our own two-dimensional understanding of their reality from the outside, and to delve deeper into their experience and its richness, vastness and complexity. To truly empathize with a character one must bring complexity to a character's reality to such an extent that we are able to steer away from the common tropes. In this regard Mueenuddin's work does not offer anything new and resorts to the same damsel in distress plot again and again.

In my stories, I've tried to bring to light a Punjab that does not stand in stark contrast to Mueenuddin's, but also is not so one-dimensionally dark and somber. Punjabi women are tough, smart and unmatched in their perseverance, and we need more narratives highlighting and showcasing that side of their personalities that shines despite functioning within an oppressive patriarchal feudal system. Like the characters Ami, Halima and Fari from *Now We Are Monsters* they are able to support themselves, oppose each other and look after each other, and hence their economy of care is much more nuanced. Contrasting my own stories with Mueenuddin's has therefore been very fruitful for me as it has helped me unlearn some of the influence his work had on me all those years ago when I was exposed to it at a young impressionable age.

Like Mueenuddin's world, my stories "Khicheenk", "Ab Hum Diyo Hain" and "Halima" take place around characters populating the Lahori house and Bhattian haveli of the feudal farmer Bhatti family. The setup for my novella Halima, is therefore quite similar to that of Mueenuddin's aforementioned three short stories: the politics and emotional tensions amongst members of the house help. In the novella *Halima,* Sajjad Kubhar, the driver, is introduced into the story halfway through, and we sense a triangle form quickly. Fari, Halima and Sajjad have something going on, but it is ambiguous who means what to whom. Although both women are interested in the man romantically, their livelihood or well-being does not depend upon his approval or acceptance of them; actually it is quite the opposite. *He* is the one dependent upon them for even his food, and through careful maneuvering both try to take control of the kitchen.

Kitchen politics is a recurring theme in Desi fiction, both literary and cinematic, from taut mother and daughter-in-law relationships being explored through who manages and controls the kitchen, to members of a family plotting murders by leaving the gas leaking for other unsuspecting members to accidentally fall prey to and burn to death. But in *Halima*, I'm experimenting with giving agency to Halima and Fari without giving them the ownership of that space, and it is Sajjad who has to starch his clothes, oil his hair, carry a pink comb and wear shiny Peshawri chappals to woo Halima and Fari and gain their favors: ghee covered rotis, extra tea serving, stolen kinnows or even access to private domestic spaces that we'll explore in detail later in the essay. In Mueenuddin's stories it's always the woman trying to seduce a man, but in my stories I'm interested in portraying a reality where both these women work hard to elevate their own status within the household and through it choosing to entertain Sajjad or not.

Of the three female protagonists from Mueenuddin's three stories, only Husna seems to pass her time doing something remotely interesting: flipping through fashion magazines. Other

than that, she as well as Saleema and Zainab are all merely products and lifeless victims of their circumstances: they do work, worry about having no man in their life and spend most of their energies chasing men and trying to keep them once successful. Their lack of agency may be explained away by Mueenuddin through a few summary lines of pitiful backstory, but how do we explain a lack of any sense of personality or engagement with the world around them? I don't want to paint a rosy picture of the state of house help in upper middle class houses like the Bhattis or Harounis in Punjab, and so Halima is seen toiling away doing chores all the time, but she is still a living breathing person with likes, dislikes and hobbies: Halima does embroidery in her free time, making beautiful tapestries and characters, she makes and gives other tattoos with needles, and is interested in the politics and follows it on TV keenly whenever Abu is watching it. Even Fari has her obsession with fancy clothes, speaking English, and her music collection on her mp3. By learning from what rang untrue to me in Mueenuddin's women characters' one dimensionality, I am able to see more clearly what I'm doing right, and how I can lean more into it. I want to create characters who can exist within the patriarchal shackles while not losing their sense of a colorful, rich self and inner life. I believe this last bit of distinction and detail is what makes a caricature into a living breathing character. Too often men writing women characters only view them as vehicles for suffering and pain, an opportunity to make (often just) political statements about the world rather than bring a character to life.

Like Mueenuddin's women, the ultimate want and goal of Halima's character too seems to be marriage. In all three of his stories where this is the case, the women are actually really seeking protection from other men in wanting this, or power and wealth. With Halima, that element is definitely there: her family does not seem to care about her and eats up all her wages, so in order to get away from a life of endless work at Bhattis and gain some semblance of

autonomy, she craves marriage. It is important to note though that she is not obsessed with committing herself to one man to gain protection from all other men; she instead wants companionship and agency through opposing her own family and the family she works for. These families have men who are cruel, sure, but the dilemma is a better representative of the much more complex, subtle and covert oppressions women in Pakistani society go through. The oppressors are not just bad angry men but happen to be the very institutions South Asian communities take pride in and boast about as being our rock: our families. Halima is looking for a way out, but she wields power through her ability to reason, learn, hone her skills for example cooking, knitting, embroidering. Her agency comes from within her, and despite having the same goal of marriage as many of Mueenuddin's stories, I'm trying to give her more agency, power and personal autonomy in the same patriarchal setup Mueenuddin's stories unfold in.

In *Halima,* her Mochi family has sent her to the Bhattis to get groomed, to learn etiquettes, manners and mainly to stay away from men of the village and out of trouble. Ami character is representative thus of the feudal landowning families serving as almost an institution where peasants from their villages send their girls to be brought up the "proper" way. This ensures they speak the less "jaangli" version of Punjabi, as city Punjabi dialects are considered more sophisticated. But above all certain families like Bhattis take pride in being pious, the way Ami narrates stories of her father's piety and hardships he faced when he became the first Hajj performer in the village. For Mochis there's a promise of a better future for their daughter if she is associated with this prestige, but there is also the greed of a constant and steady income they can keep to themselves while Halima works tirelessly.

This unique relationship between the househelp and the masters is wholly missing from Mueenuddin's work; in "Saleema" we are told about the feudal lord KK Harouni that "the old

man did not merely lack interest in the affairs of the servants - he was not conscious that they had lives outside his purview". In "Halima" the househelp is answerable to not the man of the house but Ami, and she plays a much more active role in scrutinizing and policing the househelp's every movement than Harouni or even his wife Begum Harouni. This constant conflict between what the househelp wants to live their private lives and what is expected of them builds a certain intimacy, albeit a toxic one, between the women in the house. Ami, Halima and Fari are in constant conflict, Ami wanting them both to stay away from Sajjad and them both being against each other because they seem to both be interested in it. This dramatic premise is then aided by a difference in the treatment of the setting in my stories.

The setting, or space, is crucial in building and maintaining dramatic tension throughout a work. Mueenuddin's work revels in a certain sense of spaciousness where scandalous and unknown/unknowable things are unfolding in many different parts of Harounis Lahore mansion or Dunyapur haveli, and this leads to gossip and constant curiosity; even the book's title *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* hints at this feeling of unregulatable expansiveness that is prone to beget trouble. In the short story "In Other Rooms Other Wonders" when KK Harouni dies, we are told that "the servants would never find another berth like this one, the gravity of the house, the gentleness of the master, the vast damp rooms, the slow lugubrious pace, the order within disorder" (Mueenuddin 59).

Husna is first granted housing in the separate annex from where she looks down at the goings on and wonders: "From her perch in the rooms above the garage Husna watched the guests emerge into the portico, continue speaking to Harouni for what seemed to her an interminable period, then drive away" (Mueenuddin 126). There is a constant sense of intrigue and mystery, even when people can be seen, the speculation about what's being discussed goes

on. The interior of the vast dining and living rooms inside the mansion itself dawns on a more mystical, foreboding tone: “She [Husna] walked past the formal dining room and along a corridor hung with darkened portraits of his ancestors and with photographs of him and his family in the first half of the century. She felt intimidated by this house, by its heavy gloomy air” (Mueenuddin 130) The spread of the house is not only vast and full of possibilities, its history too stretches back into the unknowable past, preserved only through the specters of photographed ghosts overlooking the damp, spacious hallways. As the story progresses she moves from this annex to the study adjoining K K Harouni’s master bedroom, with communicating doors. The boundaries are hence porous, never morally policed. Similarly, in “Saleema” servants move in and out of rooms, kitchens, servant quarters, sleep with each other, even find themselves sharing private spaces like Saleema realizing Rafik is also in the bathroom she is using and that’s how they first talk. All this is done with no scrutiny or interruptions from the owners.

However, in *Halima,* due to the aforementioned sense of moral duty, as well as a desire to control and police women’s lives, the owners feel there's a constant dictation and scrutiny the house help is subjected to. Ahmad, the narrator, tells us that “Sajjad was to stay in his second-floor servant quarters or the front of the house if he needed to be outdoors; Halima was to stick to the alley at the back of the house where she did laundry or inside the house on the first floor with us.” The Bhatti house is no gentle *berth,* instead it’s almost a panopticon where inmates are heavily surveilled and always told where to be, where to go, what to do. Halima and Fari don’t even have separate mattresses, let alone the privacy of their own separate rooms since they have to sleep on the ground floor in the drawing room. Sajjad gets to have his own quarters, because he has to be kept away from the private domestic space that is inhabited by Ami and her family, a place female house help is allowed to occupy. Although this grants Sajjad a lot of

autonomy in the outside world, Fari and Halima exert power over him by carefully controlling his access to these spaces, from keeping check of how much he benefits from the kitchen to allowing him to peek in through a window and watch Ali's TV or snitch the expensive Dior cologne from his room.

Objects therefore come to hold different meanings in Mueenuddin's world and my stories. His stories about power structures, greedy industrialists, landlords, army personnel, politicians, land managers and corrupt police, employ objects as possessions that are status symbols: Nawabdin becoming proud and pompous after acquiring a motorcycle in *Nawabdin Electrician,* Harouni liquidating his wealth after hearing about some Warraiches buying a new limited-edition Rolls Royce. In my stories, possessions have a potential for exertion of power, yes, but with a potential for intimacy. Halima getting ice creams as gifts from Sajjad, the smuggling of food for Sajjad, the daring stealing of Dior cologne, the romance in the risk taken to gift something one cannot actually afford to buy.

The big fuss the discovery of Dior's theft creates also shows us that although the stakes are very different when it comes to varying degrees of wealth at stake in these stories, the feudal and city premise is the same for my stories and Mueenuddin's. K K Harouni, a landowning civil servant who has a mansion in Lahore as well as a haveli in his Punjabi village is exactly the same as one in my story cycle: "Abu" character in my stories, a retired judge himself, has a haveli in his village as well as a house in Lahore, albeit not a mansion. The characters who populate both these places are in the same relationship with him as the ones in Mueenuddin's stories are with Harouni: one of subservience and servitude. The Bhattis in my stories are not as well off as Harounis, and them being smaller scale farmers compared to the vast endless estate of the

Harounis means my stories do not depict the more public, political, masculine struggles of power in feudal and urban Punjab.

However, in my stories there's more drama in the domestic space since even small objects like a Dior become important, and even with the mundane little everyday dealings there is more at stake. The Dior going missing at Harounis would not mean much but for the Bhattis it does. Therefore, every object's exchanging of hands becomes an important detail crucial to the story. In "Halima" Fari and Halima are both so heavily surveilled that they are not even allowed contact with any man, inside or outside the house. When it is finally made possible, it is through the secret exchange of an object: a mobile phone. The mobile that is found ringing and is later discovered to have been borrowed without permission from Qari Sahab, has grave consequences because it is a threat to the segregations and moral restrictions the Bhattis household has come to represent. When Halima claims Fari has given Sajjad her MP3 device, something they used to bond over, it's a big betrayal. Hence property is not just a means to boast status, it becomes a currency of care and love.

Revisiting a much-loved work of fiction after so many years has been inspiring and revealing. Despite a considerable age gap, I feel a kinship with Mueenuddin for his decision to go back to his father's farm in his mid-twenties after being born in the US and staying here most of his life (Mueenuddin 256). Despite the privilege of inherited wealth, one needs a lot of courage to uproot oneself from the west and put oneself in a position of difficulty and confusion like that, but he did. What he saw and observed can be read in his stories, and the result is a mixed bag. The comparisons and contrasts between our works are not meant to criticize Mueenuddin or praise my work. Instead, they have been instrumental in helping me understand

the overlaps and differences between the Punjabi feudal systems and cultures we both are functioning in, and how I can learn from his missteps and build upon his strengths.

I also realize the value of writing my stories in the first person, from the point of view of a young boy Ahmad growing up in Punjab. By limiting myself to this viewpoint, I'm able to avoid many pitfalls of writing about a people and place one is not able to fully and completely understand and inhabit. Mueenuddin's omniscient third person narrator's commentary for each and every character's psychological state and every dramatic situation's socio-cultural interpretation does not always ring true and this happens when someone seems to be peering at the story from without but wanting to write it from within. At the end of the WW Norton's first edition paperback of Mueenuddin's collection, there's a Reading Group Guide provided where Mueenuddin gives an autobiographical account of his life so far, and the process of writing of this book. He begins by admitting, "Half Pakistani and half American, I have spent equal amounts of time in each country and so knowing both cultures well and belonging to both I equally belong to neither and look at both with an outsider's eye" (Mueenuddin 249). Mueenuddin was sent to the US at the age of thirteen and returned to Pakistan in his twenties for a few years before heading back again. Most of his formative years were spent in the US, and his attempt at capturing Punjab in his fiction is admirable therefore, but it gets trickier when he gives us a long account of how much of his knowledge of this world actually only comes from his childhood days: "Because I was a child, the servants and the villagers were not guarded against me, unaware that I was watching, and therefore I learned the rhythms and details of their lives in a way that I never could as a grownup" (Mueenuddin 250).

It is this latter observation that I always hold myself accountable to; I had a peek into the lives of many of the characters that I write about—Halima, Fari, Nabbu Chacha, Munshi

Rahma,−at a young age, just like Mueenuddin, but I cannot claim to know them anymore. Mueenuddin's third person narrator takes an omniscient approach, he claims to know more about these people than anyone because of that narrative choice; I, on the other hand, don't have the courage to speak for any of my characters. They are the subaltern, and any assumptions on my part as to who they are and what they really think, is bound to be a projection. True, all storytelling is an act of imagination, and all imagination an act of empathy, but I constantly struggle with the limitations of my knowledge of these people and places in a way I don't see Mueenuddin struggling, despite his confession of being neither from Pakistan nor the US. Choosing a child's fly on the wall observe-and-report style narration therefore allows me to imbue the happenings with dramatic irony and ambiguity, while not personally feeling the creative pressure to say more than I know, or can know.

In this way, revisiting and reassessing my stance on the myriad depictions of women in Daniyal Mueenuddin's brilliant work has allowed me to reconsider how I portray women in my own fiction, and how I can try to learn from his work's shortcomings while still being inspired and moved by its strengths that proved formative for me all those years ago when I first came in contact with his stories.

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