

Daniyal Mueenuddin's Dying Men

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Abstract:

Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* is reflection of Pakistani masculinity in a metamorphosed state. A disturbingly masculine vocabulary frames the appearance and actions of the female characters. In contrast, the speech and thought of the male characters is minified in words of loss and regret. Their material ambitions and the resulting show of power, is put into sharp contrast against an increasing impotency within their personal lives. They are unfulfilled, aging or dying men. This collection of short stories has been commended for its candid illumination of a contemporary Pakistan. However, this paper aims to highlight the alternative theme that these stories contain by showing Pakistani masculinity caught in a paraxial state between colonial delineations of power, the subsequent rise of corruption in a postcolonial aftermath, and the resulting confusion about issues of identity. There has been a loss of masculinity during this process which is reflected through the metaphor of death. Rather than dejection about this state of demise, this metaphoric interpretation leads the reader towards hope of a positive rebirth.

Keywords: Masculinity; Pakistan; Daniyal Mueeuddin

I

‘The world is like a cucumber. Today it’s in your hand, tomorrow it’s up your ass.’¹

Daniyal Mueenuddin’s *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* opens a door into contemporary Pakistan. It reflects a society shaped by its own image of masculinity against a background of social and political change since its independence. But in Mueenuddin’s work there is a subtle undercurrent of a threat to this sustained sense of masculinity.² Through the complex dynamics between male and female characters, these stories communicate a slow erosion of Pakistani masculinity and follow the strain that is a result of this inevitable change.

Pakistani masculinity is multifaceted and complicated because it is built on widely divergent grounds of religious beliefs, tribal values, physical factors and deep-rooted class divisions. A modern Pakistani man struggles to juggle his conflicting roles: pious yet virile; loving yet dominant; married yet unfettered; modern yet traditional. In a country where class is established and maintained primarily through material or social dominance, masculinity is predatory. Ascendency, power and money are the defining factors. Since money and social position are interdependent, the easiest alternative victim of exercising authority is a woman. Nowhere is the show of dominance more effective than in the control of the female body. This control is often legitimized through religion, and has become one of the main hallmarks of Pakistani masculinity. With very few exceptions, men of all ages and across all social strata feel under pressure to both exhibit, and maintain their power within the means available to them. This pressure is more or less true in all Muslim populations. Kandiyoti’s comments about the masculinity/femininity issue in Turkey has a familiar ring:

The more compelling the myth of male superiority becomes ... the more difficult it is for men to live up to it. Masculinity is not an ascribed but an achieved status, one that is never permanently achieved,

because the danger of being unmanned is ever present. Thus, proving one's masculinity is a constant preoccupation as is the concern over the loss of masculinity. It may not be surprising to find that in cultures such as Turkey, which controls female sexuality rigidly and at the same time requires that men flaunt their masculine prowess, men are intensely preoccupied with possible loss of sexual identity. This state of affairs could partially account for the persistent element of danger associated with the female sex, an element that introduces the possibility of subjugation through violence especially when and if female behavior is construed as a slight against masculinity or male "honor."³

Increasingly, with the spread of education and globalization through multimedia, Pakistani women are being seen challenging this masculinity in varying capacities within different classes of society, resulting in a highly sensitized male insecurity.

Mueenuddin's interwoven stories allow a cross-sectional view of the Pakistani class system as it stands today. A vocabulary that hints at male insecurity in Pakistan is noticeable regardless of the author's primary literary intention. At a time when the global reader's curiosity about Pakistani society is in a heightened state, anthropological readings of such works are inevitable. The subtle metaphoric implications in the text do not necessarily inform the broader thematic structure, but provide a parallel strain of awareness. Indeed, in some stories men do successfully impose their power over female characters in the end, keeping the overall picture true to the type. However, consistent metaphors of death present the reader with an interesting interpretive dichotomy.

In these modern tales, the totems of masculine power are all there: expensive cars, pulsating generators and powerful machines; long roads, agricultural lands and urban mansions; wives, heirs and young mistresses. Yet in them the reader discovers a growing sense of decay and dissatisfaction. Large houses are musty and crumbling or childless and empty, lands are sold or taken over, women are old and bitter or youthful but conniving. Nothing is right, and death waits in every story-room that is entered. These are male deaths

by an overwhelming ratio. Of the eight stories, six revolve around, or result in a man's death. Besides literal deaths, a morbid panoply of metaphoric deaths underline the stories. None of the stories have happy endings.

The eight stories spin around the central axis of K.K. Harouni, a former bureaucrat and feudal landlord, who is a consistent reference point in every story. Two of the stories, "Our Lady of Paris" and "A Spoiled Man," tentacle out to his nephew Sohail Harouni and a servant at his estate, Rezak. Three others move progressively down the social ladder from K. K. Harouni's land manager Nabi Bakhsh Jaglani in "Provide, Provide" to Nawab in "Nawabdin Electrician," sliding downward still to Rafik the valet in "Saleema". The remaining two stories are roped in through a common acquaintance with the Harouni family which weaves its way into the narration. The sessions judge in 'About a Burning Girl' knows K.K. Harouni, and MP Makhdoom Talwan's nephew Murad Talwan in "Lily," meets his future wife at Sohail Harouni's party in Islamabad. The pivotal story, "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders," which appropriately lends its name to the whole collection, is the only one in which K.K. Harouni himself appears as a key character. Behind the male characters, determined in their pursuit of masculine paraphernalia, we find coldly purposeful females. Most of these women, although portrayed as economically dependent or even helpless, render the men hollow on an emotional level. The dichotomy between the defense of the insignia of masculinity, and the leakage of real power behind the masculine façade, creates a rare pathos.

The most obvious clue to the demise of masculinity, despite a preservation of its external trappings, is in the descriptions. Female characters in the stories have a disturbingly masculine aura. Moreover, to varying degrees, women in the stories plant themselves in a position of dominance within each social class. Tahmina Rashid, writing about female bodies in her excellent paper, "Militarized Masculinities, Female Bodies, and 'Security Discourse'

in Post-9/11 Pakistan,” notices how Pakistani ‘ “discourses” involve the manner in which women and their bodies are spoken and written about, and more fundamentally, what these words and attributions reveal about the cultural metaphors that shape dominant “realities”.’⁴ According to Rashid the ‘formation of “body identity” through a political process reflects, reinforces, and even challenges the distribution of power between men and women.’⁵ Mueenuddin, wittingly or unwittingly, presents rogue discourses in his stories which masculinize at least one physical attribute in most of his otherwise feminine characters, stripping the traditionally dominant male image of its authority. This leaves a telltale ‘lack’ in the masculine role. Traditionally, a semiotic approach to gender allots lack to the feminine, not masculine:

In the semiotic opposition of masculinity and femininity, masculinity is the unmarked term, the place of symbolic authority. The phallus is the master signifier, and femininity is symbolically defined by lack.⁶

However, Mueenuddin’s characters reflect a subtle yet identifiable shift in these roles. In the first story “Nawabdin Electrician,” Nawab repairs machines, rides a motorcycle, and brings home the money, but it is his wife who has a ‘strong body’ and a ‘long mannish face’ and to whom he responds ‘obediently’.⁷ In “Saleema,” the maid with ‘deep-set eyes,’ leaves her own pitiful husband with an ‘emaciated face’ and rotting ‘yellow teeth’ sobbing like a child, and determinedly sets out to seduce Rafiq the valet. She is, we are told, ‘exactly as tall as him’.⁸ Jaglani’s mistress Zainab, in “Provide, Provide” has ‘strong hands’ and a face which is ‘angular, with high cheekbones’ and which appears to Jaglani to be ‘too forceful’ and reminds him of a ‘cattle thief’.⁹ Jaglani, who ‘could order men arrested or released, could appoint them to government posts, could have government officers removed’, himself ‘feared Zainab’ whom the village men think is ‘like a hatchet’.¹⁰ “About a Burning Girl” shows us a sessions judge in the Lahore High Court whose wife is an ‘iron lady’ and ‘the poor man’s

Lady Macbeth' in his own words.¹¹ He pays his 'respects' to her every morning as she sips tea in bed.

Contrastingly, male characters undergo consistent truncations in stature. Shot in the groin, Nawabdin suffers a narrow escape from possible impotency. Rezak is stripped by the police and tortured horrendously, his legs tied wide apart. Jaglani develops a fatal cancer, and witnesses a cruel decline of political and physical power as he helplessly awaits his own death. K.K. Harouni has a serious heart condition, his earnings are dwindling, and he is being manipulated into selling off large chunks of his land at nominal prices. Murad Talwan, with his 'feminine lips' suffers being cuckolded. Rafik has thin arms and body, false teeth, and an inadequate 'rotating' mouth. Images of men in dentures and yellowing teeth recur in the stories as motifs of eroding power.

The description of a K. K. Harouni's dead body is a metaphor for the death of the traditional Pakistani male within Mueenuddin's story realm. The corpse is a mockery of his earlier image as a polo, and tennis player with a 'handsome golden face' like a god.¹²

The body of K. K. Harouni lay on the floor, wrapped in a white cloth, his jaw bound closed with a white bandage, the knot tied jauntily near one ear. His dentures had been lost, and his cheeks had caved in. His body had shrunk, lying among rose petals scattered by the servants.¹³

He is survived by three authoritative daughters. The house is also teeming with women, like ants around a dead insect. Harouni's old wife and his mistress Husna are there and 'all sorts of women had come, women from all phases of K.K.'s life, and more kept arriving, clicking through the front vestibule in high heels, spilling out into other rooms.'¹⁴ The crowds of women highlight the lack of male heirs. This surrounds Harouni's death with a sense of feminine triumph.

Rezak's death in "A Spoiled Man" evokes the same pathos. The story revolves around Rezak, a poor man who is employed by Sonya, Sohail Harouni's wife, to tend to the orchard because she feels sorry for him. As his condition improves, he builds himself a wooden shack on stilts at the back of the orchard and marries a 'simple' girl who cannot talk but tends to his house. The marriage makes him feel finally that he can join the male ranks. He feels more equal among the men in the bazaar. One day he comes home to find his wife missing and much as he tries finding her, she seems to have disappeared. A plea to help find her, results in Sonya calling a high police official to look into the matter. Ironically the police carry Rezak off and torture him as a suspect. But before the police realize their mistake the psychological damage is already done. Rezak's budding claim on masculinity is crushed and he is humiliated. Following that, he seems to simply allow himself to die and is buried at the bottom of the orchard. The vocabulary echoes his diminishment. The 'smallness' of Rezak's grave, surprises Sohail Harouni's wife. The locks on his cabin break off in time, like 'falling leaves', the cupboards are 'emptied,' and Sonya's attention to his existence is slowly 'fading'.¹⁵ It is pertinent that the last story in the collection ends with a man's death, stacked marble gravestones, and tools representing masculinity 'files and a hammer, a plane, a level' lying useless and rusting.

This shrinkage of the male image is made obvious when women muse with detachment over male death in Mueenuddin's stories, like the italicized reflection of Lily as she sits in the sickroom of Murad's dying father: '*It's a little dying world...*this household, these servants, the old man at the center.'¹⁶ Murad's father is no less paltry than Harouni. Surrounded by medicines, his resigned expression, 'dentures in his mouth shifting and making a clicking sound,' echoes regret. We are told that Murad's 'overwhelming mother, cut from the same pattern as his aunts, had destroyed his father by inches'.¹⁷ Murad himself speaks of 'his fear of being consumed by a woman' as a constant and potent threat in his life.¹⁸ Yet he marries

Lily who poses a similar threat to him with her wish for independence and liberation. Murad and his father are both losers as they are emotionally dependent on their wives. Even if Murad manages to reassert his dominance in the end, he cannot really be sure of Lily's fidelity in the future. He is dependent on her obedience for his masculinity. In Pakistan, Aslam opines, 'Men's dependence on women, if voiced publicly, can stigmatize their masculinity permanently'.¹⁹ Murad chooses not to voice his need.

Of all the male insignia, cars are the most prominent in these stories. These are more than mere symbols of power. Ownership and control of vehicles reflect a territorial impulse and their defense partakes of an essential war of survival. In "Nawabdin Electrician", the main character strives for hierarchical recognition in a world of competing males. His work as an electrician is an extended sexual metaphor. The readers follow his phallic initiation into an imperiled fraternity. With the village men crowded around, he enters a room housing an unresponsive pump and electric motor, and 'takes liberties' with it. Flipping out his 'screwdriver, blunt and long,' he cracks 'the shield hiding the machine's penetralia'.²⁰ He smears the machine with 'sticky mango sap' and miraculously, has the pump started. It is this success in proving his ascendancy over machines that earns him a motorcycle from K. K. Harouni, and it is the defense of the same motorcycle that causes him a serious injury. With the ownership of a vehicle, he finally achieves that much desired first badge in a wheeled, masculine world: 'The motorcycle increased his status, gave him weight, so that people began calling him "Uncle," and asking his opinion on world affairs, about which he absolutely knew nothing.'²¹ It is consequently inevitable that Nawabdin should be envied by lesser equipped, aspirant males in the area. Almost predictably, one evening he finds himself held at gunpoint by a ruffian from a nearby village, who wants to steal his motorcycle. The ensuing scuffle is a battle for possession of wheels. As each man makes a grab for the motorcycle in turn, the thief shoots the electrician in the groin, but 'Nawab couldn't let him

get away with this. The bike belonged to him.’²² With the blood ‘warm in his pants,’ he watches the robber as he ‘stood the motorcycle up, pushed it twenty feet, panting, then tried to start it.’ At this point, men from the village intervene and in turn, shoot the robber. Both men are taken to a nearby dispensary where Nawabdin, emerging as the brave defender of his trophy, replies to the pharmacist’s enquiry about the cause of his injury with: ‘He tried to snatch my motorbike, but I didn’t let him.’²³ To his relief, he is given the assurance that the bullet has missed his genitals, and at least one aspect of his masculinity is secure. Unlike Nawabdin, who gets special care and treatment, the robber has no such claim to manhood. In the pharmacist’s indifferent dismissal of him --‘He’s a dead man’-- we see his smooth slide into oblivion even before he actually breathes his last. His inability to get the bike is more decisively terminal than his literal death. The story ends with one man dead, and Nawabdin thinking ‘of the motorcycle, saved, and the glory of saving it’ and the extent that his stature ‘was growing’ as a result.²⁴

The vehicles in Mueenuddin’s world appropriately reflect each owner’s rightful place in the social strata. Nawabdin’s *Honda70* motorcycle is hierarchically inferior to Jaglani’s *Jeep*, which is in turn less powerful than Makhdoom Talwan’s roaring new *Pajero* landcruiser. The sessions judge is in a weaker position with a *Suzuki* car that reflects a civil-servant’s postcolonial fall from grace. He admits:

The car I drive is another of my trials. I fit inside of it like an orang-utan in a shipping cage; but for the moment, on a gazetted salary of fourteen thousand rupees, I do not presume to get a bigger one. The British built the large but run down house in which I am quartered. My wife got this residence allotted to us by spending a month camped in the living room of her second cousin, a deputy additional secretary, and our greatest fear is that someone senior to me will see it and covet it and take it.²⁵

Faced with his dominant wife, a deteriorating house and a small car do nothing to restore his crumbling manhood. Coming home one evening, the judge guesses from a 'guest's enormous Land Cruiser parked in the verandah, she must be the wife of a *big fish*' that his own wife is aiming to catch, and resigns himself to a lesser position of power. Aslam's study highlights the areas of stress for a Pakistani male in the 'dynamics of gender relations where men cannot see women as inspirational without being perceived as a "wimp" and cannot take financial help from their own wives for fear of being labeled "dishonourable" and having their social reputation stigmatized.'²⁶ In that sense then, the judge in this story is a failure.

With his aging but still graceful twin *Mercedes* saloon cars, K.K. Harouni is the last king of a shifting era of traditional masculinity. The jeep-owners only reflect a desperately aggressive denial of challenges to a male order. The *Suzuki* cars merely minify its owners. It is interesting to note that Mohsin Hamid's novel *Moth Smoke* set in Pakistan plays on a similar connection between masculine power and car ownership. The main character Darashikoh Shehzad, insecure after having lost his job, is acutely aware of his friend Ozi's *Pajero* which 'moves like a bull, powerful and single-minded', mocking his diminishment. As he drives through red lights Ozi educates him about the Pakistani rules, of which 'the first is, bigger cars have the right of way.'²⁷ Darashikoh measures his lack almost painfully in 'the difference in the sounds of slamming car doors: the deep thuds of the *Pajero* and Land Cruiser, the nervous cough of [his] *Suzuki*.'²⁸ The same recurrent parallelism turns the vehicle war between Murad Badshah's clan of rickshaw drivers and yellow-cab owners into a battle of the 'four-wheeled' and 'three-wheeled' alpha males of the public transport industry in Lahore.

A stark projection of the emblems of masculinity foils the internal insecurity of the male characters. The female characters show an emotional frigidity that offsets the men's

neediness. Maleeha Aslam's research reveals that Pakistani 'men who were influenced by women were considered "wimps" by other men and often ridiculed' and that 'an attachment to women was considered a sign of weakness.'²⁹ Not only that, but men in Aslam's research group 'confided that at times, in attempting to keep the power balance in their favour, they do the exact opposite to what they are asked by their wives.'³⁰ Mueenuddin's subtle mechanization makes his female characters play an obvious role of the oppressed, yet it is the men who end up in an emotionally weakened state. In *Provide, Provide*, Zainab is reserved and we are told that 'her lips would never be hungry'. Although Jaglani continually tells her he loves her, she '[does] not caress him' and he finds 'no response in her eyes'.³¹ Her focus is on getting a baby since neither her own husband, nor Jaglani has impregnated her. When she pleads with Jaglani to give her his son's child to raise, he knows her demand is in payment for living with him in feigned ignorance of their sham marriage, but he succumbs nonetheless. In snatching another man's wife because he is socially superior, yet prioritizing his first wife and sons to keep up a worldly charade, he seems to hold all the reins of power. His lands and the surrounding village are named 'Dunyapur' meaning 'a small world'. Yet he is horrified by the realization that this perfect world 'had been spoiled for him by the presence of Zainab.' The reduction of his person starts from within, as he is hollowed out by a cancerous growth which is a manifestation of his emotional erosion. His derision of himself is deathlier than his disease.

He reproached himself for taking his eldest son's daughter and giving her to Zainab, transplanting the little girl onto such different stock. Secretly, and most bitterly, he blamed himself for having been so weak as to love a woman who had never loved him. He made an idol of her, lavished himself upon her sexual body, gave himself to a woman who never gave back, except in the most practical terms. She blotted the cleanliness of his life trajectory, which he had always before believed in. She represented the culmination of his ascendance, the reward of his virtue and striving, and showed him how little it had all been, his life and his ambitions. All of it had been thrown away, his manliness and

strength, for a pair of legs that clasped his waist and a pair of eyes that pierced him and that yet had at bottom the deadness of foil.³²

When he says goodbye to her for the last time, his half-hearted assurance that his sons will look after her, is met with a clipped 'Fine' from Zainab. Although he walks out and gets into his jeep which is being polished by Mustafa the driver as usual, the gleaming jeep does nothing to elevate him. It only serves to highlight the incongruity between his inner state and his outward appearance.

The young girl Husna, who sets out to climb the social ladder to 'escape the gloominess of her parents' house' by hooking the great K.K. Harouni himself, in the central story, has a similarly cold ambition. On their first night together, Harouni is touched that she is a virgin but realizes that what he at first mistook for shyness was actually 'a focus in her eyes, expressing a hooded rage to get what she wanted.'³³ She wheedles money from him to fill two steel trunks kept locked in her room with 'everything from raw silk to electric sandwich makers.' Watching Harouni dead in the end, Husna looks at two of the society women gossiping at the funeral, and feels that 'she want[s] to be like them, they were what she had lost.' She has lost not a man she loved, but the social station. Yet she considers herself at least materially victorious when she carries away the heavy steel trunks as her booty even if she has lost her position to the more powerful Harouni daughters. The Harouni daughters' claim on 'masculinity' is more powerful in being heirs, than Husna's is, now that Harouni is dead. As Harouni's mistress, Husna's young body was the instrument of power. A female body outside of the masculine scope holds little power, and projects no threat.

Mueenuddin's stories present defiant female bodies under an uncomfortable masculine gaze. The interesting twist lies in the helplessness and powerlessness of the male characters against the stark reality of these female bodies. Rashid's opinion is that,

In Pakistan, the female body has been politicized to such an extent that it functions as a battleground for ideological, philosophical, and religious debates and agendas between the pseudo-modernist military regimes and traditionalist *mullahs*. Pakistani women embody and practice the value systems of society through their bodies and their social behaviour. The ruling elite often conform to the traditionalists (religious and cultural) and lack the political will to seriously challenge existing practices. Rather, it exploits the situation to use female bodies as a tool to support, protest, and subvert the rules of patriarchal societies. Since the prevailing discourses and practices continuously abuse and marginalize women through their socially constructed bodies, *it makes sense that new knowledge and critiques should be closely linked to women's varied experiences of those bodies*.³⁴ (Emphasis mine)

In that sense then these stories do prescribe an alternative look at female bodies than the socially constructed one in Pakistan. The main female character in *Saleema* has no scruples in using her body to get financial security. We witness a defiant role-reversal in that he is not the victim; she is the one who sets out to hunt the males and asks herself, '*After all, why not? Why shouldn't I?*' She violates the traditional role by revealing her impatience with Rafik's hesitation in succumbing to her:

She looked over at him, his serious wrinkled face, his stubble. Despite the rain, moths circled around the lamps hanging from the ceiling. She kept bumping her hip against the pillar. *Come on, come on*, she thought. Finally, he said, 'Well at least they haven't started planting the cotton yet.'

She turned, with her back to the pillar. 'Rafik, we're both from the village, we know all this.'

He looked over at her quickly. His face seemed hard. She had startled him. Then he did come over.³⁵

Instead of waiting for Rafik to make the first move, she puts an end to his small-talk by effectively challenging him to make a physical move. When he hesitates, she puts her arms around him. An open acknowledgement and exposure of female eroticism challenges the 'value systems' put in place for Pakistani women that Rashid highlights. In a brazen move, Mueenuddin draws the reader towards 'the calendar on the wall that showed a picture of the

Kaaba, the black cloths covering the stone and crowds circling around it' as a mocking religious backdrop to Saleema's blatant rebuttal of its strictures:

She felt aroused, yet wanted to get up, to go somewhere. She took off his clothes, peeling off his tan socks. Their skins touched. Standing up and going to the corner, she bent down on purpose to pick up her shirt, letting him see her. She saw reflected in his eyes the beauty of her young body.³⁶

Having worked her way into Rafik's bed, she keeps him in a sustained 'disturbed' state by sleeping naked. This overt flaunting of a female body projects the text as a statement of change. Similarly, in *Lily*, we see a Pakistani woman seeking freedom. Tired of a social life in the city, Lily seeks the commitment of marriage and looks forward to a quieter life of running a house on a remote farm. She wants to leave her old life with her sexual escapades behind. Very soon the novelty wears off and Lily finds herself craving the society of her old friends whom she persuades Murad to invite to the farm. With their arrival her sense of frustration increases. She sleeps with one of the male guests at her party in a bid to exercise her freedom. When Murad reminds Lily of her earlier plans, she confronts her husband with 'You like me when I'm tied up with a pink bow around my neck like a kitten. I am not the type to be dutiful. I'm messy and willful and self-destructive.'³⁷ And though she feels that she has 'wronged' Murad by sleeping with another man at her house party, 'yet the tension of the past and her sense of being unworthy ha[s] disappeared.'³⁸ She is surprised at her sense of liberation in shaking off her guilt, and anticipates becoming 'old and self-forgiving.'³⁹ Lily's is the image of a female that challenges Pakistani masculinity.

II

There are three levels on which Mueenuddin's representative male figures fail to conform to their roles: the heroic, the social, and the personal. The loss of the Pakistani heroic ideal can be seen in the institutional corruption reflected through the male characters in

positions of power, and their fall from grace. On a social level, the struggle to sustain material or financial superiority over other males is shown to dent masculinity. And perhaps more importantly, in personal relationships with women, a loss of control over female body/behavior seems to be the biggest reason for a sense of inadequacy in the male characters. The reasons for this loss are complex. In her book *Masculinity, Rationality and Religion*, Durre S. Ahmed talks of the great sense of insecurity that a Pakistani male is facing today. This sense of loss is a result of a long historical journey. Ever since the conception of Pakistan, the country has not seen stability.

The rapidly changing geopolitical scene, especially the collapse of communism, has left many Pakistani moderns treading air. The situation is exacerbated by moderns also feeling trapped in the current largely negative image of Islam as it has emerged, preceding and in the aftermath of the Gulf War ... Hence the attempts for the formulation of an identity vis-à-vis Islam and the west, leading to a bewildering array of combinations in nomenclature.⁴⁰

As a result, many have more recently sought out Islam in a 'hairsplittingly' extreme form. Among those who do not want to take a religious stance there is a growing despair, greatest in those who are close to or above forty years in age. It is interesting to note that most of the male characters in Mueennuddin's stories are similar aging men caught in a conflicting warp between centuries-old expectations, and a modern accusatory world. She points out that this 'is the first post-partition generation, at this stage caught between a rapidly receding, if not gone, sense of security that was present with the parental, founding fathers.'⁴¹

Durre is of the opinion that the archetypical heroic man is a key determinant of modern human behaviour, and that it 'is instrumental in bringing into consciousness the interplay between individual achievement, human limitation, and the need to belong to a social group.'⁴² She traces myths and archetypes of a male hero in Pakistan and the inevitable death of each, leaving behind outlines of imagined identities that cannot be filled in. According to

her the first masculine ‘monotheistic hero’ that early Pakistan had as an archetype was Jinnah. However, the contradiction in Jinnah’s personal versus political image has made him an uneasy heroic ideal to follow. Sayyed and Tyrer discuss at length the consequence of ‘ancestor worship’ in Pakistan and the transformation of Jinnah into the *Quaid-e-Azam*.⁴³ Jinnah’s greatest tragedy, in their opinion, is that in his posthumous re-creation as a national hero Pakistan has found an excuse for deferring its decolonization. Yet in Jinnah’s figure even today the location of either Islamism or secularism is a futile exercise. Rereading history to look for Jinnah’s approval or disapproval of a religious state has caused anxiety. Ambiguity about his ‘western’ preferences in language, dress and food, has only resulted in more confusion. This continual rehabilitation of Jinnah as a key figure makes him an uncomfortable role model for Pakistani men in particular. Since a monotheistic archetype is a fusion of both the principle of unity, and a concern with individual perfection, it is destined to fail as an ideal.⁴⁴ It does not allow for the decline and fall necessary for the making of a hero.

Next is Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the heroic myth of a Pakistan, who ‘perhaps came closest to the myth of the hero in terms of betrayal, hubris and fall,’⁴⁵ with his powerful political entry and his shockingly fateful end. For a while Bhutto’s secular influence had allowed Pakistani masculinity to show more tolerance for women. With his controversial hanging, Zia-ul-Haq’s new wave of Islamic frenzy redefined masculinity for a second time. Passing of the Hudood Ordinance in Pakistan in 1979 had massive repercussions. The Hudood Law was intended to implement Islamic *Sharia* law, by enforcing punishments mentioned in the Quran for *Zina* (extramarital sex), among other things. The ordinance was later criticized as leading to an unfair incarceration of women and in facilitating oppression against them by men.⁴⁶ Despite the suppressed criticism felt at the time, what followed was ‘the first literal fusion of the heroic/martial archetype and its monotheistic counterpart with the advent of Zia-

ul-Haq, consolidating further the violence inherent to the masculine-religious perspective.⁴⁷

As Maleeha Aslam points out:

Misogyny was institutionalized in law during General Zia's regime (1979-1988). The state started promoting *ulema* for political gains and to give Islam an "official" face. Maceration of the feminine side of Islam was indirectly allowed by a state that was driven by "militaristic machismo" and interested in promoting an "*ulemasculinised* theology" that was primarily "aggressive and violent".⁴⁸

Exercising control over women thus became synonymous with Pakistani/Islamic masculinity. With slow but inevitable progress in the areas of female education and empowerment, this masculinity faced an increasing challenge. None of the political male heroes had significantly augmented the Pakistani male image within the social framework. The fall of each only contributed to an increasing sense of loss of masculine identity.

New definitions of masculinity in a post-partition Pakistan have always had to juggle religious doctrines against secular progress. The futility of such a position has complicated things further. Since the justification of Pakistan's creation was based on the practice of Islam, a completely broadminded masculinity has never stood a good chance. Yet the longing for progress has continued. Like most South Asian writers in English, Mueenuddin weaves into his stories relics of a colonial past. In most cases his characters express nostalgia for the British rule, coupled with regret about the rising materialism and corruption in its wake. Murad says in exasperation, 'I swear, it's impossible to get anything done in this country. We just sit around scratching our fleas and telling lies. The British should come back.'⁴⁹ The people with real positions of power are conspicuously projected as anglophiles. When Jaglani goes to see the Chief Minister of Punjab to plead for a seat in the assembly for his son, he is put in his place by the differences in clothing and appearance prior to any verbal rebuff. The Minister sits behind a desk, 'his Western clothes, a pinstripe suit and gold cuff links and English shoes, distinguishing him from Jaglani'.⁵⁰ Even in lesser characters there is a harking

back to the Raj. Mian Sarkar, the reader of the sessions judge and another shadow of a colonial past, is always dressed in a three-piece suit like an Anglo-Indian baboo. Because the judge has no real authority, and is merely an apathetical, hollowed designation of power long past, Mian Sarkar becomes the real doer and informer of a changed order with truisms like ‘For every lock there is a key’ and ‘In Pakistan all things can be arranged.’⁵¹ Mueenuddin’s narratives hint at the oscillating love-hate relationship with the west which has torn male identities into varied stances that range from extreme servility, to an aggressive defiance through flaunting of wealth, to a nostalgic reenactment of anglicized nobility. We see shades of all these in these stories. In Jaglani and Makhdoom Talwan’s characters, clad in native *kurtas* and turbans, we have men seizing material power to counter old insecurities; in Murad and his father a weak reflection of colonial fidelity; and in the characters of Rafik and Rezak a deep-rooted, three-hundred-year strain of bred obedience.

Identity issues trail from postcolonial perplexities to a more incisive sense of isolation, following the 9/11 incident. Older characters in the stories are captions of a postcolonial sense of loss. Sent to England for what was considered better education, they came back almost inevitably with a heightened awareness of lack. Men with brown skins and ‘white’ values could never quite reconcile themselves with either their birth-cultures, or their adopted identities.

In a photograph Murad had shown her of his father as a young man at Oxford many years ago, lanky, with Murad’s long and delicate face, not quite smiling, wearing an overcoat, a scarf tied tightly around his neck—already he looked cautious, insulated, at loss.⁵²

Sohail Harouni’s mother warns Helen, his American girlfriend, about Pakistan and its complexes when she tells her, ‘You would hate Pakistan, You’re not built for it, you’re too straight and you don’t put enough value on decorative, superficial things- and that’s the only

way to get by there.’ Rafia’s meaningful answer to Helen’s question about the possibility of Sohail settling in America outlines the dilemma of a Pakistani male:

‘And how would that be? He would be emasculated, not American and not with any place in Pakistan, working at a job he wouldn’t like. I see these boys come through Karachi on two-week vacations--the boys who settled in America--and they always have this odd tamed look, a bit sheepish. It’s so much worse after 9/11-- they more or less apologize daily. Sohail’s background will always be a factor...He is proud of who he is, but they would knock a bit of that out of him. In any case, for you he would do it, join a law firm in New York. He would even stay with you, if that’s what you wanted. But I promise you, he wouldn’t be happy, he wouldn’t feed the best part of himself.’

Helen looked at Rafia squarely. ‘And in Pakistan will he feed that best part?’

‘I don’t know,’ cried Rafia, startling Helen. ‘I don’t know.’⁵³

Rafia’s unsure reply to Helen’s question about whether Sohail’s identity was any more secure in Pakistan, is the telltale mark of a sense of bewilderment about the foundering state of Pakistani masculinity today.

Mueenuddin’s depictions mirror the contemporary situation in Pakistan. To contest a loss of identity and a sense of diminishment, Pakistani men appear to have driven themselves towards violence and manipulation in the bid to win back their self worth. In his book *Aspects of Violence*, Willem Schinkel defines state violence, personal violence, and structural violence. Structural violence is, according to him ‘most often neglected’ but at the same time the most common, as the reasons for this kind of violence lie in a series of ‘differentiations’:

...structural violence thus exists in a situation in which relative social position is a main structuring factor, where an uneven division of knowledge exists, where access to information is scarce and unevenly divided, where money as a generalized communicative medium structures a social system. With respect to the differentiation between societal subsystems, it exists in the dividedness of the

subject which has become fractured, decentred. It also exists in the structural coupling of certain function systems, for instance when the economic system causes resonance in interaction-systems. Such resonance can help explain forms of domestic violence, which are related to notions of masculinity and femininity.⁵⁴

Various shades of violence are at play in Mueennuddin's stories. From the calculated burning of a wife by her husband in "About a Burning Girl" to the unfeeling beatings administered by the police to an innocent man in "A Spoiled Man," readers get a sense of the thinly curbed frustrations of Pakistani men. The indifferent tone in reporting such violence bespeaks a resignation in the face of the complexity of structural violence.

Structural violence exists, in Foucault's terms, as a normalized state of affairs. It is the way things are. The subsistence of relations of dominance and dependence that arises out of the particular differentiation of a social system is itself a form of violence, of reduction of being, which is unrecognized as such because of the very character of structural violence: no agency can be pointed out as its intentional source. Since the ideology of violence accords only to intentional agentic violence the label of 'violence', the status quo of any social system cannot be recognized as violent.⁵⁵

Research carried out in 2010 exploring Pakistani masculinities finds that men think 'violent behaviour and harassment of powerless groups [is] a part of being a real man'.⁵⁶ The attitude of the policemen who beat Rezak shows a cultivated callousness which reflects that real-world attitude.

The two uniformed policemen lifted Rezak off the hook and threw him to the ground. Rubbing his hands together, the big man looked down at Rezak appraisingly, as if considering his next move.

'Stretch him out and bring me the strap.'

They pulled down his *shalvar*, carried him to a bench, and stretched him out on it, one pulling his arms and one pulling his feet. They had removed his *kurta* when they hung him up on the wall.

The big man brandished what looked like the sole of an enormous shoe, with writing on one side in thick black script. ‘See what it says? It says “Sweetheart, where did you sleep last night?” Understand?’

Without warning, he swung.

Rezak shrieked, a startled high-pitched sound. He never had felt pain like this, which spread flickering all through his body.

Another policeman came into the room when Rezak screamed and stood by the door, watching, with a grin on his face.⁵⁷

Jaglani uses harassment to get what he wants when he forces Zainab’s husband, who is helpless and poor, to leave her. When the husband pleads, ‘I beg you, don’t take what’s mine. You have so much, and I so little,’ Jaglani unflinchingly replies with ‘I have so much because I took what I wanted. Go away.’⁵⁸ In turn, Makhdoom Tulwan is cruel to Shabbir, Jaglani’s son, and sends him out of the election campaign in humiliation. Power is thus maintained through brutality.

III

The underlying metaphoric theme of Mueenuddin’s work does point toward a declining masculine order. That may or may not necessarily reflect a real change, but the text could be read as the desire to deconstruct the existing framework of Pakistani masculinity to allow for a positive change. Death, disease, and loss are essential for new life and new beginnings. As such, the collection is not ultimately a dire picture.

References to strewn, useless, or rusting tools are utilized as symbols of ineffective masculinities. The tools are shown in repose and are only dimly illuminated against a

swallowing nighttime darkness. In Nawabdin Electrician, we see the moon at night ‘throwing dim shadows around the machinery strewn about, plows and planters, drags, harrows.’⁵⁹ The headlights of Jaglani’s jeep, as it drives into the dusk, illuminate ‘the tractors standing in a row along the wall, plows and harrows and disks here and there.’⁶⁰ Rezak’s files, hammer, plane and a level lie useless in his hut after his death, mocking his incapacity at keeping a wife. Tractors, jeeps, cars and motorcycles feature prominently in these stories as means of keeping up appearances, but in Lily’s dream they are a metaphor for change.

She had a dream. Flying alone in an airplane, high above the clouds through an ice blue sky, the wing caught fire, orange and flickering. Metal flew off in sheets, the machinery coming apart. A panel above her opened, crumpling back, throwing her out into the slipstream, and her parachute shook out like hair falling loose, streaming lines, then a canopy overhead. The plane spiraled away below her until it became a speck and hit the ground with a burst of flame, as she drifted down alone through an enormous sky.⁶¹

Lily’s ‘drifting through an enormous sky’ and the plane which she sheds off is her metamorphosis into a free-flying state from a mechanized male one. The image of machinery coming apart is a reinforcement of the theme of disintegration and decay. Yet paradoxically, hopelessness is not the axial theme. In showcasing decay, the possibility of an organic cycle of healthy rebirth is the real revelation. Mueenuddin’s revealing chain of stories propels readers towards an anticipation of undiscovered wonders yet awaiting us through new doors into other rooms of the future.

NOTES

1. Mueenuddin, 'Provide, Provide,' 85.
2. Maleeha Aslam's book *Gender-based Explosions: The Nexus between Muslim Masculinities, Jihadist Islamism and Terrorism* is perhaps the only work offering a definition of Pakistani masculinity in a contemporary context by analysing qualitative data collected from samples taken from three social strata: low socio-economic group, socially stigmatized and distressed, and university students and professionals. Chapter 7 titled 'Self-image, social expectations and pressures' is about the self-sustained pressures and expectations that Pakistani men subject themselves to in order to uphold their masculinity. This role is increasingly hard to maintain as more women have started working outside the house.
3. Deniz A. Kandiyoti, 'Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case,' *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2. (1987), pp. 317-338.
4. Rashid, Tahmina, 'Militarized Masculinities, Female Bodies, and 'Security Discourse' in Post-9/11 Pakistan,' 566 – 578.
5. Rashid, 567-68.
6. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 70.
7. Mueenuddin, 'Nawabdin Electrician,' 6.
8. Mueenuddin, 'Saleema,' 18, 31.
9. Mueenuddin, 'Provide, Provide,' 57, 55.
10. Ibid., 65,67.
11. Mueenuddin, 'About a Burning Girl,' 88, 89, 93.
12. Mueenuddin, 'In Other Rooms, Other Wonders,' 101.
13. Mueenuddin, 'In Other Rooms, Other Wonders,' 127.
14. Ibid., 127.
15. Mueenuddin, 'A Spoiled Man,' 237.
16. Mueenuddin, 'Lily,' 179.
17. Ibid., 177.
18. Ibid., 184.
19. Aslam, 189.

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20. Mueenuddin, 'Nawabdin Electrician,' 2.
 21. Ibid., 5.
 22. Ibid., 12.
 23. Ibid., 14.
 24. Ibid., 16.
 25. Mueenuddin, 'About a Burning Girl,' 86.
 26. Aslam, 199.
 27. Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, 25.
 28. Ibid., 81.
 29. Aslam, 183.
 30. Ibid.
 31. Mueenuddin, 'Provide, Provide,' 59.
 32. Ibid., 75.
 33. Mueenuddin, 'In Other Rooms,' 115.
 34. Rashid, 568.
 35. Mueenuddin, *Saleema*, 31.
 36. Ibid., 36.
 37. Mueenuddin, 'Lily,' 205.
 38. Ibid., 207.
 39. Ibid., 209.
 40. Durre S. Ahmad, *Masculinity, Rationality and Religion: A Feminist Perspective*, 111.
 41. Ahmad, 111.
 42. Ahmad, (appendix I.A, 119), 121.
 43. S. Sayyid & I.D. Tyrer, 'Ancestor worship and the irony of the 'Islamic Republic' of Pakistan', *Contemporary South Asia* (2002), **11**(1), 57–75.

44. We can see the failure of the Jinnah archetype (also known as the Quaid-Azam, or the supreme leader) manifested through passages like the one in 'Provide, Provide' with its reference to Jinnah's forgotten photo, as Jaglani waits in the anteroom of the corrupt Punjab Chief Minister:

Jaglani waited in the anteroom with twenty or thirty other supplicants, mostly provincial politicians from the business classes, who gathered in circles or huddled together on grimy sofas, speaking in undertones or puffing cigarettes. Two pictures hung on a wall of the dirty smoky room, one of the country's founder, the Quaid-e-Azam, and next to it, just slightly lower, a photo of the party leader. (72-73)

45. Ahmad, 114.

46. Rahat Imran, 'Legal Injustices: The Zina Hudood Ordinance of Pakistan and Its Implications for Women,' 78-100.

47. Ahmad, 114.

48. Aslam, 158.

49. Ibid., 204.

50. Mueenuddin, 'Provide, Provide,' 73.

51. Mueenuddin, 'About a Burning Girl,' 98, 99.

52. Mueenuddin, 'Lily,' 181.

53. Mueenuddin, 'Our Lady of Paris,' 149.

54. Willem Schinkel, *Aspects of Violence: A Critical Theory*, 185.

55. Schinkel, 186.

56. *Understanding Masculinities: A formative research on masculinities and gender based violence in a peri-urban Area in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.*

57. Mueenuddin, 'A Spoiled Man,' 231,232.

58. Mueenuddin, 'Provide, Provide,' 64.

59. Mueenuddin, 'Nawabdin Electrician,' 9.

60. Mueenuddin, 'Provide, Provide, 67.

61. Mueenuddin, 'Lily,' 158.

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