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## Flowers, queens, and goons: Unruly women in rural Pakistan

Lubna N. Chaudhry<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article focuses on girls and women perceived as deviant, difficult, or different by their communities in rural Punjab, even as it pluralizes and historicizes performances of rebellious, unruly selves. Specifically, the paper uses fieldwork interactions with girls who enjoyed wanderings in out-of-bound spaces, women who claimed a position of authority as headmistresses in village schools, and women who troubled the social imaginary through their acts of intimidation and involvement in local politics in order to examine defiance of gendered norms within the context of material, structural, and discursive realities framing individual lives. The analysis illustrates how regional differences among various parts of Punjab, and hierarchies based on class, kinship, and religion within regions, demarcated the contours, scope, and consequences of women's deviance and unruliness. While the research participants' agency remained constrained by the violence in and around their lives as well as, in certain cases, their own complicity with hierarchical relations and masculinist discourses, the accounts and performances of deviance highlight the heterogeneity of rural Punjabi women's experiences, debunking the myth of passive Muslim women, and asserting the imperative for nuanced, in-depth understandings of women's negotiations of power relations.

*Keywords:* resistance, Pakistani women, qualitative research

### Framing the Project

"She just keeps coming back<sup>2</sup>. We take her back to her in-laws' home. I wake up in the morning, and who is sleeping in the courtyard outside? *Maharani jee*<sup>3</sup>." The members of the research team, including myself, followed the direction of Salma's<sup>4</sup> accusatory finger. The subject of the tirade, a very thin young woman most likely in her late teens, appeared oblivious to our gaze and to Salma's words. She was lying on a cot, her eyes closed, and her neck supported by newspaper rolled into a pillow. Her *dopatta*,

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<sup>2</sup> The dialogue and conversations in this article have been reconstructed from my field-notes and notes taken by research assistants. The original conversations took place in various regional varieties of Punjabi and Seraiki (a mixture of Sindhi and Punjabi spoken in Southern Punjab, Pakistan). I have retained some Punjabi and Seraiki words if I felt the translations did not capture the connotations. English equivalents are provided mostly in the footnotes, although in some cases I insert them in the text within parentheses.

<sup>3</sup> Literal meaning "respected queen". Of course, Najma was being sarcastic.

<sup>4</sup> The names of the research participants and their villages have been changed, but the name of the district, the larger administrative unit, as well as its geographical location has been retained.

the long scarf usually worn across their chests or on their heads by women in Punjab, lay on her side.

Salma spoke again, so our eyes moved back to her face. This time, however, Salma looked helpless rather than angry.

“I just don’t know what to do with her. She really is harmless, you know. She is not a *badmaash*<sup>5</sup>, only stubborn and very attached to our two children. Sometimes I wish we could lock her up. I raised her after my mother-in-law died ten years ago ... God, O God, why did you make her so hard to control?”

In a few minutes, we found ourselves taking leave of Salma, who had become focused on getting Neelam off the cot to help her cook. Although Salma promised that she would talk to us later in the week, we were not able to coordinate our schedules before we left their village, one of our sites in Central Punjab for the 2001 Pakistan Poverty Assessment<sup>6</sup>. Other people in the village did talk about Najma’s family: some were sympathetic; others mocked Neelam’s odd behavior, as well as the inability of her family to curb her rebellion.

This article focuses on “hard to control” women and girls I came across during fieldwork in rural Pakistan in the context of a World Bank funded study<sup>7</sup>. More specifically, I write about five women and two girls deemed difficult to discipline, disorderly, or deviant, by communities I visited in rural parts of Punjab, the largest province in Pakistan in terms of population and land size<sup>8</sup>. My “data” on Neelam remains scant -- I never saw her with her eyes open, yet this piece on uncontrollable girls and women in rural Punjab owes its genesis to the brief fieldwork encounter described above.

My project here spilled out of a research endeavor that centered heavily on economics, even though our ethnographic orientation contextualized household income and expenditure within stratified rural communities. It was the very emphasis on defining the normative, including the imperative to locate gender norms, which vividly brought to light the women and girls who did defy those norms in one way or the other. Additionally, our adjustment to women’s work schedules, their conversational styles, and the distractions posed by neighbors and extended family members freely walking in and out of the interview context generated the possibility for this paper. The opening vignette exemplifies the methodological and representational approach in this piece of writing. As I primarily write about and from within key field encounters, eschewing a neat summing-up of women’s lived realities, I seek simultaneously to convey the vitality and complexity of the women at the heart of this paper, and the impossibility of ever capturing the multi-layeredness of their lives and agency.

The conception of agency underpinning my analysis of unruliness draws from poststructuralist feminist notions of gendered identity as “enforced cultural performance, compelled by compulsory heterosexuality” (Jagger, 2008, p. 20-21)), and of subjectivity,

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<sup>5</sup> Literally meaning “one who does bad things for a living”; in common parlance can refer to promiscuity.

<sup>6</sup> Although eventually cited as World Bank, 2002, the qualitative component of the 2001 Pakistan Poverty assessment was a joint venture undertaken by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute and the World Bank. I was one of two Senior Researchers for the study. Chaudhry (2009) details the findings of the study with respect to rural women.

<sup>7</sup> We visited two villages in the pilot stage, and four villages in the formal data collection stage with a team of eight researchers, four of them women. We spent approximately a week in each site.

<sup>8</sup> Punjab has also been the province that has dominated politics in post-independence Pakistan. In 1947 80% of the region historically seen as Punjab came to Pakistan, and 20% went to India.

the experience of being a self, as discontinuous, dynamic, and relational, contingent on the impact of multi-leveled power relations in a context<sup>9</sup>. From such a perspective, the sustained enactment of gender is vulnerable to interruption or disruption, carrying within itself the potential for its failure, and the potential for an agency whereby norms are defied or resisted, generating spaces where possibilities arise to challenge the oppression and violence generated by compulsory heterosexuality.

Building on Mahmood (2005)'s concern with the interiority of the subject, I explore the relationship between desires and performance as it unfolded within the research situation. Embodied behavior, for instance, the use of the *dopatta* in specific ways (covering the head, draping the shoulders, or as in Neelam's story above, just thrown on the side), or, the refusal to stay within sanctioned spaces and roles, is vital to the discussion in the paper. Nevertheless, the interviews and conversations also represent spaces of reflection, introspection, and negotiation, what Besio (2005) sees as auto-ethnographic exercises, whereby research participants examined, albeit incompletely, their own motivations and desires even as they located themselves in particular fields of power. Of course, my presence as a researcher associated with the development industry, a "modern"<sup>10</sup> woman visiting from the "government" city, Islamabad, mediated the performances as rebellious, deviant selves as well as the knowledge production about deviance.

Writings on Pakistani women in general, feminist and otherwise, in academic and advocacy quarters, have tended to delineate the impact of anti-women laws and development policies (for instance, Khan, 2006; Mumtaz, 2009). While these studies have been timely and compelling, rural Pakistani women in particular are cast as disadvantaged, striving to continually meet basic needs in spaces characterized by totalizing feudal structures and religious discourses (see Zubair, 2001 for an alternative conceptualization). The present study aims to implode these monolithic representations by attending to the heterogeneity and contradictions of women's desires, experiences, and performances of selves within the specificity of their life circumstances and social locations. Women's words and performances illustrate how their agency is constrained *and* enabled through identities made available through religion, kinship/caste,<sup>11</sup> and other markers of difference, including socioeconomic class<sup>12</sup>, and household means of livelihood.

Unlike radical feminist celebrations of women's resistance (see Sempruch, 2004), I complicate the celebration of individual women's unruliness by grounding my accounts within material and discursive realities distinctive to the spaces and times in which their lives unfold. I am particularly concerned with how postcoloniality -- the persistence of colonial violence and structures into the present and the collusion of nation-building agendas with neo-colonial processes -- is embodied, manifested, and contested, within gendered contexts of specific geographies and relationships. Place, including women's physical, residential, and socioeconomic locations in their villages, and the particular

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<sup>9</sup> See Lather (1991) and Chaudhry (1994) for elaboration.

<sup>10</sup> The words in quotes in this sentence are direct quotes from research participants.

<sup>11</sup> Caste refers to the kinship collectivity with which a household identifies. Research participants tended to use the term "*zaat*" meaning caste, interchangeably with "*biradri*" meaning kinship group.

<sup>12</sup> Class refers to socioeconomic status that is a consequence of the possession or lack of assets and resources, including land and opportunities for employment.

location of their villages within Punjab, emerges as a salient theme in this investigation of the nature and scope of agency as well as attempts to order or govern unruly bodies<sup>13</sup>.

The differential relationships<sup>14</sup> of Southern, Central, and Northern Punjab to colonial and post-independence centers of power have translated into different paths to modernization with profound implications for women's relationships to space, their economic status, and their access to healthcare, education, and the rule of law.<sup>15</sup> Reshaped by the colonial development of the canal-based irrigation system, Central Punjab, especially, became home to increasingly affluent politically active landlords and progressively poorer sharecroppers and small farmers. Post-independence, Central Punjab has continued to be at the center of Pakistani electoral politics, paradoxically characterized by a fragmentation of local community structures intensified through post-Partition population transfers, and an acute sense of caste-based loyalty. Despite the persistence of socioeconomic disparities, compared to both Southern and Northern Punjab, it is more "developed" with better roads, more functional schools, and more accessible basic healthcare (Chaudhry, 2009). Interestingly, however, it is the rain-fed Northern Punjab, where peoples' livelihoods are not mostly dependent on agriculture, and relatively free of feudal constraints, where poverty indicators seem to be the lowest (Arif and Ahmad, 2001). Southern Punjab remains the least developed part of Punjab, exemplifying the continuation of a colonial mode of control that predates the commercialization of agriculture in the 1800s: the landlords in Southern Punjab receive state patronage in exchange for keeping the masses in check (Chaudhry, 2008a).

The narrative and analysis in the next section illustrate how regional differences, and caste and class based hierarchies within the regions, demarcate the contours, scope, and consequences of women's deviance and unruliness. The sub-section titles, "Flowers," "Queens," and "Goons" are organizational strategies to juxtapose and examine comparable vignettes from the field rather than categories of analysis. The final section shares parting ruminations.

## **Unruly Girls And Women In Rural Punjab**

### ***Flowers***

"The old women say she is *allahlok*<sup>16</sup>, and so sensitive. This child is like a lotus growing in a swamp. How do I protect her?" Farzana's mother sighed as she showed Nadia, my research assistant, and I the objects her daughter had made out of date-palm leaves and water-reeds. "She was sick a few months ago with a fever that would not go away. She worries about her father's TB. She made herself get well so she can continue

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<sup>13</sup> I owe the seeds of my analysis with respect to place and women to the work of feminist geographers. See, for instance, Nagar, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Here I draw on analyses by Alavi (1983); Ali (1988), and Khattak, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> The introduction to Sangari and Vaid's (1989) edited volume provides an instructive overview of the impact of British colonialism on women's lives. Colonial policies, in general terms, resulted in the consolidation of feudal structures; entrenchment of village-level caste and kinship-based hierarchies; a proclivity to deprive women of their right to inherit agricultural land and other assets; and the removal of justice apparatuses to far-flung urban centers, outside the reach of women and economically challenged populations.

<sup>16</sup> Literally meaning "God's people." Refers to a sense of unworldliness or piety.

to go and collect the reeds from the riverbank. Without her he would not have the money to buy Paracetamol<sup>17</sup>.”

“We do the best we can,” Farzana’s sister-in-law, her brother’s wife, sounded defensive as she cut off the older woman, “We can not keep on doing X-rays. It is a simple matter of priorities. My father-in-law is old, and my children are young. This household has only one real earning member, my husband. The little land we have does not give us enough. He (the husband) also works as a laborer. You tell us should we nurture the young or save the old? Anyway, Farzana should not be wandering around by herself. She is not a child anymore. People talk and her brother is embarrassed by this waywardness.”

Quite unperturbed by her sister-in-law’s callous analysis of her father’s failing health, and the attack on her behavior, Farzana Channa gave us as a gift a hand-fan she had made. She told us that since the village had no electricity, she sold a lot of hand-fans in the summer and autumn. She then invited Nadia and I to take a walk with her along the River Chenab.

As we walked on the riverbank and through the fields, Farzana regaled us with stories about her village, Tibba Channa, and its inhabitants, including her own family and kin. She was the first one among the female population in the village to talk to us openly about the rape<sup>18</sup> of Balochi<sup>19</sup> women by the sons of a local influential, Farzana’s cousins. Although as larger kinship groups the Balochis and Farzana’s clan were not in any hierarchical relationship, within the immediate context of the village, the Balochis were not as powerful, in terms of political connections and land holdings, as the Channa landlords addressed honorifically as Jams. The Balochi women had been allegedly brought over to the Jam’s sons by their male relatives in exchange for some favors from the Jam clan. No one had informed the police, although some Baloch men had protested, which led to a conflict among the Jams. We found out from other women that the police never came into the village without permission from the Jams, and the quarrel among the Jams over the Balochi women got resolved because the Jams needed each other during the local body elections that year. For Farzana and her peers the implications of the rapes outlasted this resolution:

“Ever since the *zabardasti*<sup>20</sup> I am more careful about going to the river. Especially when it is getting dark. All the girls in the *basti*<sup>21</sup> (residential cluster) also stay away from my cousins now. I am not very friendly with many girls. They do not like going out like I do. I don’t like talking with them ... and I do like to keep to myself. But now we sometimes talk about the bad thing my cousins did. We talk about the dangers of having a woman’s body.”

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<sup>17</sup> An analgesic.

<sup>18</sup> Chaudhry (2008a) provides a more comprehensive account of our research team’s experiences and encounters in Tibba Channa.

<sup>19</sup> Baloch tribes, who migrated from Balochistan around 500 years ago, are scattered across Sindh and Southern Punjab. For their history in the colonial period see Roseberry (1987).

<sup>20</sup> *Zabardasti* refers to rape. In literal terms it translates to “done with force; imposition; coercion.”

<sup>21</sup> Literally means “where we live.” In this context, a *basti* is a residential cluster, houses built together in a distinct space seen as one unit. Tibba Channa had six key *bastis*. In rural Southern Punjab, it is customary to see *bastis* and smaller group of houses spread out far away from each other, separated by fields, tracks, and paths.

Neither her mother's representation of her as innocent nor her sister-in-law's depiction of her as rather irresponsible (attitudes echoed by other women in Tibba Channa in various conversations) completely resonated with our impression of the articulate, deep-thinking, and clear-sighted girl we got to know over our time in her village in Southern Punjab. The youngest of seven children, Farzana had turned fifteen just before our visit. She had attended school only intermittently, and did not consider herself literate: the villages she had lived in did not have functional schools, and only a few girls from the wealthier Jam households had attended school in the closest towns. Her family had moved into the village a few years ago to be near their relatives. Although her father, Sabir Channa, had very little land, Farzana's four older sisters were married into affluent Jam households in the village, since they were very beautiful. Farzana and her parents lived with her older brother's family in a small house adjoining the bigger houses of her father's kinsmen in the central *basti* of Tibba Channa. Her brother had taken over the control of the land when Sabir, who was sixty at the time of the fieldwork, became too unwell to work. The wealthy relatives had helped out with Sabir's treatment when he was first diagnosed with tuberculosis, but then that support petered out.

Farzana, however, was not willing to give up on Sabir. "My father is the tree that gives me the shade I need to survive in the heat," she said poignantly. The frail Sabir did not let anyone get away with badmouthing his daughter, and commanded enough respect for people to back off. Also, when Farzana fell ill, Sabir, who could not secure funds for his own cure, collected enough grain to pay for his daughter's treatment by the dispenser (there were no qualified doctors within and near the village) at the Basic Health Unit in the adjacent village. Farzana appeared to be a warm, open, and generous person, but we realized quite early in our interactions that her taking on the role of our *de facto* guide was motivated as much by a forlorn hope that we could somehow help with her father's health problems<sup>22</sup> as her sense of hospitality towards the educated women from Islamabad. Her last words to me were, "Don't forget my father, *Baji*<sup>23</sup>."

Earlier in our fieldwork, during the pilot stage in the village Dhamyal in District Attock, Northern Punjab, we had spend time with another fifteen year old referred to as a "flower." In that case, though, the metaphor had connotations of sexual attractiveness and readiness, rather than the purity and fragility ascribed to Farzana by her mother and other women. We met Saadia, while we were interviewing her maternal grandmother, Amna Begum, a woman of sixty or so, cited as one of the poorest in that village, a widow from a *Kammi Kameen* caste, a server caste<sup>24</sup>, who had possibly been living with unconfirmed tuberculosis for some years. Saadia was Amna Begum's oldest grandchild. Her father had abandoned his wife and children a few years ago, so they had moved in with Amna Begum. Amna Begum's sons who lived in Rawalpindi, the cantonment city bordering Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, had their own shoe shop, and did pitch in to take care of their sister's children financially and emotionally, but they also had their nuclear families to support. Amna Begum's fears with respect to being responsible for her

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<sup>22</sup> I did not forget Farzana's father, but I could help only through money, not some institutional miracle whereby a cure was possible for his tuberculosis in its advanced stage.

<sup>23</sup> Translates into older sister.

<sup>24</sup> Literally meaning the lowly ones, who work and serve. *Kammi Kameen* refers to a group of non-agricultural castes or kinship groups designated as lower castes in rural areas in Punjab.

daughter's family, especially Saadia, were not confined to the economics of the situation, although that was a pressing concern. "When a garden is blooming, there are sure to be trespassers. How can a weak old woman stop anyone from plucking a beautiful flower like this one here?"

Nadia and I were struck by Saadia's vibrance, charm, and intelligence. She was quite well dressed compared to the other young women, from both server and landed castes, living in the village. Although simple and quite worn out, the clothes were well-cut, and highlighted her lovely figure. Later we found out that Saadia altered her clothes and the manner in which she braided her long hair every few months in accordance with the latest trends: she made regular visits to her maternal uncles in Rawalpindi, and also persuaded them to send her fashion magazines when she could not visit. Saadia told us that she had been unable to pass the eighth standard examination for the last three years. It was difficult to study for the examinations, because they were so near to the harvest period, the period when she got to work in the fields. She had worked in the fields since she was eight. She complained that her fellow villagers were always criticizing her for moving around too freely within and outside the village. Her grandmother, mother, and uncles had allowed her a good deal of "azaadi."<sup>25</sup> Still, she avoided going out alone as much as possible, since she felt harassed.

Saadia and her grandmother proved to be extremely helpful in providing us details about village resources and dynamics. In the midst of the interview, much to her grandmother's dismay, Saadia told us about a murder that took place roughly two years before our fieldwork: a young woman from the key landlord family in the village was killed by her brother-in-law, her sister's husband<sup>26</sup>. In Saadia and Amna Begum's opinion (Amna Begum could not resist being pulled into the conversation, in spite of her initial misgivings), the young woman was murdered because of a land issue, and not because she was having an affair with a man from a *Kammi Kameen* background, although that was the reason given by the murdered woman's family. The police came in to investigate the matter, but did not make any arrests. Saadia was especially vehement in her defense of the murdered young woman's virtue, although when I asked her if she had known the woman well, she shook her head.

When it was time for us to leave, Saadia offered to walk us over to the landlord neighborhood bordering the *Kammi Kameen* locality. Amna Begum frowned, and muttered that she needed to be careful. Partially in deference to the old woman's wishes, and partially because after the story of the murdered young woman, I had started to become afraid for Saadia myself, I asked the younger children in the room to accompany us. Nadia and I saw Saadia on and off during the rest of our stay in Dharmyal, sometimes from afar and at others close enough to hold a conversation. Despite her earlier protestations to the contrary, we mostly met her outside her neighborhood within the village or near the fields on the periphery of the village, her gait reflecting the same vitality and poise as her speech.

Farzana and Saadia stand in out in my notes and memory as fifteen year olds who go where they are not supposed to go. They both narrated forbidden tales<sup>27</sup>, even as they

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<sup>25</sup> Freedom.

<sup>26</sup> I write about the murder of the young woman in Dharmyal in more detail in an earlier publication (Chaudhry, 2008b).

<sup>27</sup> These tales were later corroborated in different variations in other interviews and conversations.



literally walked on paths deemed out of bounds by norms meant to govern their behavior. It was noteworthy that both of them identified with the women in the stories they narrated, especially as in both cases the women were strangers and belonged to “other” kinship groups living in out of bound spaces. The frankness, self-confidence, and boldness exhibited by Farzana and Saadia were probably an outcome of the familial roles and responsibilities assigned to them as well as a consequence of their favored status in their families: Farzana was the youngest child, adored by her parents; and Saadia was the oldest, indulged by her maternal uncles. Of course, their performance as defiant young women who bravely shared the truth in the research context was also mediated by their obvious aspirations towards the kind of modern womanhood I represented - the kind they glimpsed on television and during visits to the city - as well as in the hope inspired by a team from Islamabad with their air-conditioned car.

While Farzana was aware of her “difference” from other girls her age, Saadia appeared to be more analytical of the reasons behind her independent mind-set and behavior. Her self-reflexivity, her capacity to engage with the why and how of her construction as the transgressive flower by her grandmother and others, was in part due to her comfort level and knowledge about what was expected as an interlocutor with urban educated women. She was familiar with the script for the interaction because she had more exposure than Farzana to city life and people, and she had access to both reading materials and television. Although Saadia’s own dwelling had no electricity, her village in general was electrified, and at least every other household owned a small television. There was no electricity in Farzana’s village at all: women told us they listened to the radio using batteries stolen from rich men’s tractors. Unlike Farzana’s village, Saadia’s village had a private middle school and separate government primary schools for boys and girls that were functional, and it was connected to bigger cities through an easily accessible highway. In other words, Saadia’s life and her words were more squarely embedded within the trappings of modernity, although Farzana with her faith in the research team from the country’s capital definitely interpellated herself as a modern citizen-subject with demands from the state.

Saadia’s privileges as the resident of a relatively more developed village in Northern Punjab, nonetheless, were undercut by her gender, economic and caste positioning. Even though the law enforcing authorities put in an appearance at the murder of the young woman in Dharmyal, the crime did not warrant an arrest: the chances of justice in cases involving women appeared to be equally remote in Northern Punjab and Southern Punjab. Saadia’s grandmother’s lung disease, just like Sabir Channa’s tuberculosis, remained untreated due to lack of funds despite their village’s relative proximity to a range of healthcare facilities. As girls, Saadia and Farzana were under surveillance and under discussion by family members and other people around them: their bodies and movements were continually scrutinized. Still, Saadia’s deviance got marked differently than Farzana’s, and became a matter of fear for her grandmother as compared to the mixture of indulgence and slight exasperation shown by Farzana’s family members. Many women in Dharmyal spoke of the negative and un-Islamic influences of television and city-life on girls, specially those from lower caste households, who were forgetting their place, and using “fashion” and “stylish talk” to lead men astray: Saadia was most probably included in that group of sinful girls.

As a *Kammi Kameen*, Saadia's body was paradoxically under stricter vigilance and seen as more available. Saadia's relatively unrestricted upbringing could not solely be ascribed to her family's urban outlook; in the larger study (Chaudhry, 2009) we found that most women from *Kammi Kameen* families, including younger unmarried women and girls, in all parts of rural Punjab enjoyed greater mobility than their counterparts in land-owning families, mainly because codes of respect tied to the control of women's bodies were relaxed when household economies relied on women's work outside the home. This mobility, however, came at its own risks, as *Kammi Kameen* women were more likely to face sexual harassment.

While the bodies of women from landed groups were repositories of honor and worthy of protection, the bodies of poor, lower caste women became the territory on which power could be violently inscribed. Farzana was chastised for roaming freely as a girl, but her relationship to the Jam families afforded her a certain security, albeit a tenuous one based on continued acceptance of her father's status in the landlord *basti*. The *zabardasti* Farzana talked about was an extreme example of the sexual violence that beset her village – server caste and poorer Baluchi women's lives were mired in a sexual economy where exploitation and harassment were norms<sup>28</sup> – yet most young women and girls from Channa households, the “daughters” of the *basti*,<sup>29</sup> felt safe enough to walk around without bothering to drape themselves with their *dopattas* within the neighborhoods and outside in the fields, even if they did not venture as far as Farzana. Saadia kept her hair covered with her *dopatta* whenever we saw her, yet for her grandmother, her virtue and perhaps even her life remained threatened, her loveliness and her sense of style merely serving to amplify that threat.

So, on the one hand, there was Farzana, the mystical “lotus” flower, with an aura of other-worldliness and a preference for solitude, and on the other hand, there was Saadia, the enticing “flower,” whose aesthetic presentation of self and assertive demeanor set her apart from other girls in her surroundings. Both displayed a clear sense of entitlement towards their right to movement: they did not give up their excursions despite a professed cognizance of the risks. For their mobility, perceived by many as disruptive of the accepted order, could be seen as jeopardizing their security. In both cases, “patriarchal connectivity” (Joseph, 1993, p. 452) underwrote risky moves; Farzana had the backing of her father, and Saadia was supported by her uncles in the city, although Sabir, despite his feebleness, was more of a patriarch, due to his presence in the village and his status as a landed peasant. Ironically, Farzana and Saadia's alleged out-of-placeness was partly a consequence of their desires to demarcate their place within their communities. Farzana continued her walks along the river-bank to collect reeds despite the heightened sense of insecurity in the wake of the rapes because she knew her father's health and presence, which she saw as being dependent on the analgesics she purchased, was crucial to her well-being. Saadia's identity as the girl with urban connections, who enjoyed better clothes and more freedom than others in her village, could be seen, to a certain extent, as a strategy to transcend the dinginess inherent in her accorded status as the fatherless daughter living in the *Kammi Kameen* part of the village. Caste and class, therefore, inflect the transgressions as much as the responses to these transgressions in postcolonial contexts of gendered violence where paradoxical myths of development as

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<sup>28</sup> See Chaudhry (2008a) for details.

<sup>29</sup> Young women who were married into the *basti* did not share that privilege.

peril and as promise work in tandem with injunctions attributed to Islam and colonial legacies of structures and stratification.

### *Queens*

“Swishhh!” Almas, my research assistant, deftly caught the hand wielding the stick just before it hit Nasreen. We had restrained ourselves in the last hour or so of our time in the courtyard of the Government Girls’ School in Akalipur, District Faisalabad, from interfering with the headmistress Zehra Khatoon’s habit of striking her students with her stick and hands: she hit them if they talked too loudly or if their white uniform *dopattas* slipped off their heads (it was a hot autumn; all the classrooms did not have fans, so some of the classes were being held outdoors). The sight of a grown woman in her late twenties, especially one who was there to participate in a focus group organized by the headmistress Zehra for our research team, at the receiving end of the branch was too much. Nasreen, a divorcee, had incurred her former teacher’s wrath by telling us about the money she made through sewing and embroidery.

In the course of the morning, it became apparent that Zehra had brought together her former students whom she thought needy and worthy of receiving assistance from the “people from Islamabad.” she had clearly instructed them to *not* talk about any viable means of livelihood or economic support. (On an earlier visit to the school, I had requested her help in getting together a group of women from representative sub-communities,<sup>30</sup> but she apparently had not believed my preamble that emphasized the exclusively research-based nature of our project.) Eventually, as the headmistress kept on speaking for the other women, Almas took Zehra aside and conducted a fruitful interview on Zehra’s history as an educator. Meanwhile, we did get some information about larger village dynamics and women’s individual and familial experiences, but the session went down as the most “low energy” focus groups of our fieldwork. The headmistress, even when she was otherwise occupied, retained her capacity to terrify.

Zehra Khatoon in Akalipur, District Faisalabad; Majida Syeda in Dharmyal, District Attock; and Sardar Begum in Raheema, District Attock: these were the “queens” of our field story. Majida ran her own private co-educational middle school, while Sardar Begum like Zehra was the headmistress of a government primary school for girls; only her school had fewer students. Neither Majida nor Sardar were as dramatic as Zehra in the brandishing of their power, although Majida came close with her occasionally sharp tongue and propensity to consign children to corners, especially little girls whose *dopattas* were not in place. Sardar Begum’s authority seemed quite absolute; her students were very orderly and she did not need to raise her voice. Majida was the oldest of the three, in her late fifties, with a grown son, who with his wife also taught in the school. Zehra and Sardar were around forty with school-age children.

During our fieldwork besides studying both government and public schools as examples of service-based institutions, we used schools as strategic entry points into

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<sup>30</sup> By sub-communities we meant groups within the village who saw themselves as distinctive collectivities. Akalipur was the only site during our field-work where there was a religion-based collectivity as well. The village had a visible Christian minority in addition to kinship and caste-based collectivities. Mostly the salient divisions in our sites were kinship-based (some Christians in Akalipur said their caste was Christianity), although in Central and Southern Punjab we found that sect-based divisions, that is peoples’ identities as belonging to different Muslim sects, like the Shiite and Sunni sects, became salient at particular times as well.

communities. Although there were women teachers who commuted from nearby towns, the women who seized my research imagination were those whose lives were firmly embedded within the soil of the village everyday, even as they somehow retained a certain aloofness mostly derived from a sense of superiority or “specialness.” This sense of exceptionality was fostered by their families and other residents of the village, and was tied to their eminence as educated women in a context where there were few formally educated men or women, but was also a consequence of a complex intermeshing with other symbols of status, such as caste and/or economic standing in the village. For each woman the intersections of gender, class, and caste were manifested within specific contours of local and regional power relations and societal features. It is noteworthy that all three queens were in Central and Northern Punjab where overall literacy rates as well as literacy rates for females are higher than Southern Punjab.<sup>31</sup>

Zehra, Majida, and Sardar all spoke of their struggle as girls and young women and the battles they fought in order to finish high school, and then acquiring a college education. They spoke of hunger strikes at key junctures in their educational trajectories, of teaching children who needed after-school assistance to help with their schooling expenses despite the prosperity of their families, and of collusions with mothers and siblings to elude the wrath of patriarchs and at times watchful matriarchs as well. For Zehra and Sardar the primary motivation had been the desire to escape the fates of women around them.

Both Zehra and Sardar had brothers who did not do as well as they did in school, but went on to college with the complete financial and emotional support of their families behind them. For Zehra and Sardar the injustice and unfairness they perceived in the situation further fuelled their resistance against norms that sought to prevent their educational advancement. Majida’s case was slightly different: her father firmly believed in the dictum credited to the Holy Prophet that all Muslim men and women should get educated even if it meant going to China. Also, Majida grew up in Rawalpindi, one of the larger cities in Pakistan, and so her family had access to tutors who would come to their home and instruct Majida. Majida’s first hunger strike paved the way for her to go outside her home to an educational institution when she was fourteen.

Zehra and Majida belonged to Syed families: they traced their lineage to the Holy Prophet Mohammed. The status of Syed families in Punjab in general, and rural areas in particular, was bound up with their identities as the direct descendants of the Holy Prophet, and predicated on the espousal of particular religious beliefs and a strict adherence to practices tied to those beliefs. While mostly revered and respected, we found that in villages across the different regions Syed women were especially expected to observe *purdah* norms. Even among affluent Syeds, and most of them were well-off since they were historically well-supported by local landlords<sup>32</sup>, and some Syed families had over the years saved enough to buy land, girls were expected to stay home as soon they hit their prepubescent years.

From such a perspective, Zehra and Majida’s success in attaining their education was a monumental achievement. It probably helped that Majida was raised in

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<sup>31</sup> According to the census data for our study, Akalipur had the highest literacy rate at 53.6% and Tibba Channa in Southern Punjab, the lowest at 11.5%. Our sites in northern Punjab averaged at 43.1%.

<sup>32</sup> Landlords provided grain, cloth, and cash sometimes in return for religious and healing services, but also as a sign of reverence for the Holy Prophet’s descendants.

Rawalpindi, and Zehra in a Central Punjab village that was relatively developed and not far from a major city, Faisalabad. When Zehra was growing up in Akalipur, a few girls and young women from well-off families among other kinship groups, were even going off to Lahore, the provincial capital, to attend college. Zehra spoke of how the stories about these girls and women helped to strengthen her resolve much in the manner that her example helped to break the barriers for younger Syed girls in her area.

The motif of resistance in the life-stories of the three headmistresses persisted in their representations of their lives as educators. Zehra Khatoon started to teach when she was single. There was again significant resistance from family members, in particular her father, but by that time Akalipur had its own girls' school and community members had pressed her father to cave in, since they preferred that a "*Syedzaadi*," the daughter of a Syed, teach their children. After her marriage Zehra continued to teach. She was somewhat bitter that her husband had never seriously pursued a vocation, since she brought in money. When asked if she would quit her job if her husband were a more reliable provider, she answered reflectively that she would probably not, since it had become her life, but she resented her husband not taking enough responsibility.

In Majida's case as well her being a Syed helped establish her career in the village; however, she seemed to enjoy more privileges than Zehra in part because of an effusive side to her personality, but also because her in-law's family was the only Syed family in the village. Additionally, Dhamyal was a more rooted and cohesive community than Akalipur. Whereas a large percent of the population in Akalipur had settled there in the post-1947 partition years, and the community structures appeared more fragmented and somewhat urbanized, people in Dhamyal retained more respect for feudal and religion-based hierarchies. The *Kammi Kameen* in Dhamyal, for instance, offered Majida their services, at times of their volition, and sometimes at the behest of the landlords, for free on a regular basis: they cleaned her house, and assisted in the cooking of meals. Zehra had to use her authority as the headmistress to get her students and their families to do her similar favors. While the theme of Zehra exploiting her student and their families dominated peoples' discussions of the schools in Akalipur, we found very little objection to Majida's modus operandi and generally high praise for her efforts as a teacher and headmistress.

The young Majida's initiative to set up the first government school in the village, a short while after her marriage and move there, had received popular support. A few landlords did oppose the move and tried to block the opening of the school, but Majida used her father's city connections to lobby against that opposition and succeeded in her ambition. Eventually, after twenty-five years of running the school, she retired and with money her husband earned through his religious healing practice in the Middle East she started her own school for boys and girls. She had a few scholarships specifically for the education of *Kammi Kameen* girls, and again a few landlords in the village did not approve. Once more, Majida's status as a Syed, and her savvy negotiation style which, in her words, combined a bit of flattery with defiance, helped her to continue in her own way. As a Syed, her family received their yearly provision of staple grains from local landed families, and even the landlords who disagreed with her philosophy of promoting education for the poor and the lower castes continued to send in their share.

Sardar Begum, like Zehra, began teaching when she was unmarried and living with her parents. As the daughter of an influential landlord, however, she set up a school

in the courtyard of her house. After she got married, her husband was supportive of her desire to continue teaching, but her husband's father saw this as a violation of his family's code of honor. When there was a vacancy in the local government school, Sardar applied for the position and got it. From then on a power struggle between Sardar and her father-in-law was set into motion that had lasted the fifteen years since she started teaching. Initially, as "head of household" he attempted to persuade his son to stop his wife from working in the school, but Sardar's husband refused to co-operate. Giving up direct intervention as the reigning patriarch, Sardar's father-in-law, an influential landlord himself, with linkages to many public officers in the city, had then over the years embarked on a series of initiatives to either close down the girls' school in the village or get Sardar transferred. (The rationale for the latter was that if Sardar got a job away from the village she would have to resign.) Sardar with the help of connections she had through her father and brothers managed to block each attempt to sabotage her teaching career. She told us laughingly that the entire Punjab Education Department had become her ally. Her father-in-law's interference had actually served to consolidate her status.

The three teachers therefore displayed a remarkable perseverance; they attained their goals and maintained their lifestyles, despite various degrees of opposition, and even outright conflict, in their lives. They also seemed to be committed to the education of their students: Sardar, like Majida, encouraged *Kammi Kameen* girls to continue their education, raising funds through community-based initiatives for their books and uniform. Zehra Begum's commitment to her students appeared to extend beyond their schooling to their general well-being even as adults: her act of bringing together her relatively poorer students for our focus group was primarily a well-intentioned act. Also, the very presence of these women in their contexts shaped other peoples' conceptions of women's education and place. Our survey showed that villages with functional government school for girls, especially when the teachers were active members of their communities, yielded more positive perspectives on girls' formal education, even if there were gripes against those teachers or disapproval of gendered transgressions (Chaudhry, 2009). The women's determined pursuit of their ambitions had definite reverberations that went beyond their individual lives. Their resistance to gendered norms pertaining to formal education and women's employment could not be dismissed as inconsequential or "peripheral" to the communities they inhabited (Nagar, 2000, p. 583).

Yet, despite the multi-layered impact of the three women's interruptions and re-inscriptions of gendered codes, their performance as women striving for and achieving status in their communities in ways that had been deemed as exceptional or deviant for women has to be situated within the hierarchies framing their lives. Their perceived difference from other women cannot be merely interpreted as individual triumphs, since this difference very visibly intersected with other relations of domination and subjugation in their particular communities as well as larger rural Punjab in general. The performance of "specialness" was predicated not just upon their affiliation with affluent, relatively well-educated families with strong kinship-based networks or highly respected caste backgrounds, but on actively utilizing classist and religious discourses and norms to perpetuate unequal power relations.

This was more obvious in the case of the two Syed teachers, Zehra and Majida, who used their status as teachers to extract favors from their students and their families,

and to disseminate a punitive gendered brand of Islam among their students with their fixation on the correct placement of *dopattas*. Majida, especially, shocked members of the research team with her enthusiastic endorsement of the murder of the young woman from the landlord family who was supposed to be having an affair with a man from a *Kammi Kameen* family (see previous sub-section). There were also glaring contradictions between the egalitarian and philanthropic views espoused by Sardar and Zehra, and their actual behavior towards their students and families. We did not see Sardar administer corporal punishment, but she did not allow women from *Kammi Kameen* backgrounds to sit on the chairs next to us. The *Kammi Kameen* families in Sardar's village Raheema spoke of her discriminatory treatment towards their children in a vein similar to the Christian families in Zehra's village, Akalipur, who pulled their daughters out of the government school because the headmistress segregated them from Muslim children.

The queens, hence, asserted their power over the children in their jurisdiction in a manner that was reminiscent of the way in which the Pakistani state and other multi-leveled patriarchies structuring life in Pakistan, especially since the 1980s, have attempted to monitor and control the bodies of women and others seen as minorities, especially Christians, through the usage of discourses attributed to Islam or traceable to feudal constructs of honor and respect (see Khattak, 1994; Rouse, 1998). While their resistance cannot be summarily dismissed, it has to be read in conjunction with the contradictions engendered by their social positioning and their complicity with relations of domination and subjugation in their locales and the larger context of postcolonial rural Punjab.

### **Goons**

"So how is this survey going to help us? Is this just *likhat purhat*<sup>33</sup> or can we expect some results?" The old woman who called herself Mai Dahay proceeded to answer her own question. "Of course there will be no results. I am not foolish, but you must be foolish if you think our kind can be helped with surveys. As long as there are the landlords, the poor will not have enough to eat. Even during the floods, they swallow up all the aid."

Mai Dahay's son and son-in-law sitting across us on a cot uttered grunts of agreement. Nadia and I were sitting on a cot next to Mai. We had just finished household and community level questionnaires with this *Kammi Kameen* family who lived on the periphery of the most peripheral *basti* in Tibba Channa. Mai Dahay earned her living primarily as a birth attendant, while her son and sons-in-law transported bricks from kilns to construction sites on donkey carts. The younger women in the household had small children, so they only worked outside the home during the harvests, but they tended the animals the family owned or raised for other people. Mai Dahay seemed to rule the household with an iron hand: everyone's earnings were handed over to her. She completely dominated the conversation with us; others only interjected occasionally.

As we took our leave, Mai and her son-in-law told us about the unfortunate television license inspector who had visited them just a few weeks before our field-work (the Dahay family owned a small battery-run television, a present from a landlord in a

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<sup>33</sup> Literally meaning "writing reading," the phrase is meant to convey a dismissal of the value and impact of paperwork.

nearby village whose son Mai delivered). Mai had set her dogs on him. We were told that we were spared because we seemed harmless and likeable, even though the exercise we were putting people through, that is, our research project, was ultimately futile.

Later as we conducted interviews in other households in the *Kammi Kameen* neighborhood, Nadia and I found out that people in her neighborhood regarded Mai Dahay with a mixture of awe and trepidation. She had a reputation for effortlessly delivering babies and miraculously saving mothers' lives. She was also admired for the way she ran her family; even though she controlled the household finances, and her son continued to be the apple of her eye, she ensured that the younger women, including her daughter-in-law, had decision-making power in the family. The unease she evoked in her neighbors was born out of her too blunt, even abrasive manner, her acute sense of territoriality (any chickens who wandered into her courtyard became the family's dinner), and her easy, even friendly terms with the local powers-that-be, the landlord Channa families in the central *basti* in Tibba Channa. Some of the younger men in the neighborhood, especially, referred to her as merely "the landlords' dog." These vocal young people, critical of feudal authority, had been prevented by the Jams from voting in the local body elections held a short while before our fieldwork.

Even during the interview with us, Mai Dahay and her family had said mostly positive things about their landlord benefactors. The Dahay family also clearly stated that they had supported the Jams during the elections. Only towards the very end, after I had put my pen away, did Mai bring up the issue of the outcome of our study and her observation about landlord power.

Through accounts we gathered from the Dahay family as well as their neighbors, the Dahay household had created a space for themselves in Tibba Channa by forging a server provider relationship with the rich Jams. When they moved to the village after floods destroyed their native home several years ago, it was initially quite difficult as the household explored various livelihood opportunities. Although at that time their father was alive, the children gave credit to their mother for keeping them together. Over the years, in addition to delivering babies and bricks from the kiln, the Dahay family, mostly Mai, had started to deliver messages from the Jams to other residents in the *Kammi Kameen* lane: the "landlords's dog" was known to threaten dissidents with her dogs. Still, even her greatest critics grudgingly admitted that Mai offered her services at births in their neighborhood free of charge.

Our fieldwork afforded only one other opportunity to get a multi-perspectivist look at another woman who appeared to be terrorizing people around her. Tahira Jatti<sup>34</sup> in Akalipur, District Faisalabad, was a self-proclaimed *gunda* (goon), who had occupied a piece of public land on the periphery of the village to raise her animals, store her grain, and house any offspring who was out of favor. The village had won the court case against Tahira, but she somehow continued to come up with stay orders against her evacuation. Other women in the village, mostly poor women from lower caste and Christian families whose dwellings bordered the land Tahira had illegally occupied, called her a *badmaash*<sup>35</sup>, who used her police connections to harass them and even extract money. Tahira's youngest daughter Yasmin had joined the police academy as a

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<sup>34</sup> Jat is a Punjabi kinship group or caste. Jatti represents a feminization of the caste name. Tahira used Jatti as a last name for herself.

<sup>35</sup> In this context the word means "miscreant."



trainee a few months before our visit, and this had further alarmed Tahira's persecuted neighbors.

Nadia and I were in the midst of interviewing Kausar, a rather despondent woman in her thirties or so, who was Jat by caste, on what we later found out was the infamous plot of land, when a tall woman of undeterminable age with a rather regal bearing entered through the makeshift gate ushering four goats in front of her. The newcomer smiled at us and announced, "I am Tahira Jatti." She extended a hand to each of us, so we shook hands and introduced ourselves, quite enthralled by the warmth exuding from the woman.

Tahira joined the conversation. She sat on the cot next to us, while her daughter Kausar continued to sit on the ground. While earlier we had been mostly talking about village dynamics and institutions in our bid to get a "Jat perspective," Tahira also filled us in on how her personal history and the history of her family fit into larger village happenings. She told us that her family had migrated during the 1947 partition. She had been married off to another Jat when she was quite young, because in those uncertain days after independence her brothers did not want to take the responsibility for her security. Her husband had died recently of meningitis. She told us that of all her children – she had three sons and five daughters – only the youngest, Yasmin, had finished school. Kausar and her children lived with Tahira because her husband was seriously sick and could not work.

When we asked her if she had any reservations about her daughter Yasmin working for the police, Tahira embarked on an impassioned monologue. She said that the people in the village did not approve of her daughter working in the police department and called it a "*gunda*" department, because there were a lot of unsavory characters, all men, working in that department. Her response to these people was that she herself was a man and a *gunda*, because everything depended on what you were internally in your thoughts, your *nayyat* (intentions), and how you regarded yourself. "Look at you girls," pointing to Nadia and I, "you go around interviewing people, but your *izzat* (respect) is in your eyes. If you had a lot of make-up or put *surma* (kohl) in your eyes, men would follow you around. But you do not seem to be that way."

Nadia and I spent most of that day with Tahira Jatti. She took us through the village to her "legal" home near the central square. Although we refused the mid-day meal, we graciously accepted the tea Kausar made for us. Tahira was the one who talked the most but over the afternoon neighborhood young men, two Syed and others from Jat backgrounds, who seemed to adore Tahira, dropped by and contributed to the discussion.

Throughout that afternoon lighthearted banter co-existed with serious analyses of village politics and events with nuggets such "men can never be good," "these boys play cricket all day, but it's not their fault there are no jobs for them," and, "we need to control the population" offered by Tahira generously sprinkled through it all. Tahira gave her succinct views on how so-called higher standards of living were responsible for the increase in poverty: employment opportunities had not kept pace with the perceived need for more money. "People now use *ghee*, ginger, tomatoes in simple everyday *handi*<sup>36</sup>. They want dozen clothes. There are fans. TVs, fridges." Their village had been completely electrified ten years ago, only a few *Kammi Kameen* and Christian households still lacked electricity. With the advent of the light bulb, according to Tahira, had come the intimation of scarcity.

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<sup>36</sup> Technically a baked clay pot used for cooking, but is also used to refer to a meal.

Tahira and her young friends also talked gleefully about their coup d'état during the recent local bodies elections. Shaukat *lumberdar*,<sup>37</sup> one of the village level revenue officials, had contested the elections, and because of Tahira's interventions he had lost the election to his young opponent from a Syed family. Shaukat, also a Jat, had offended Tahira when he had sided with the in-laws of one of her daughters: the in-laws had sent the police after Tahira's daughter. The Syeds had helped Tahira in her campaign against Shaukat, which resulted in a splitting of Jat votes.

We had to terminate the gaiety quite reluctantly when a relatively older Syed man showed up and tried to flirt with us in English. Averting our eyes in the proper modest manner, while Tahira watched approvingly, we took our leave, promising to keep in touch. Tahira, despite her claim to manhood, evidenced a strong belief in the modesty of womanhood.

Tahira continued to be very friendly and available to our research team throughout our time in Akalipur, even as we continued to hear how she terrorized mostly the weak in the village, although she had also caused some disturbance in more powerful quarters. The staff at the Basic Health Unit in the village, for example, swore that they would never let her come into their premises. We therefore remained wary of her offer of "protection." Nadia and another research assistant did go back to her home for a follow-up interview. Her daughter Yasmin was present during that interview. In addition to hearing about Tahira's plans for Yasmin's future in the local *thana* (police building) the research team got to know about Tahira and Yasmin's experiences with the local policemen, the private and government medical providers, and the local schools. Among other riveting stories, Tahira narrated how she took on the quack, the *lumberdar*'s brother who ran a private dispensary, for selling expired drugs, and the headmistress in the government girls' school for making students, including Yasmin, clean her house.

Tahira Jatti's performance as "goon," then, appeared to encompass a broader range of issues and contexts than Mai Dahay's services for the Jam and protection of her family's interests, although both women were strikingly similar in their expansive presence, sense of humor, and keen intelligence. They both thoroughly enjoyed sharing their views and critiques with us, and were among the most critically analytical thinkers among the research participants we encountered, regardless of their gender, during our fieldwork. While both women enacted a type of intimidation and undertook practices as troublemakers that are generally linked to masculine subject positions, Mai Dahay targeted chiefly the poor, and, despite her subtle critiques, was overtly co-operative with the ruling segment of her village. This key difference in the two women's range of their performances as masculinized terrorizing selves can be mainly attributed to differences between the nature and contours of patriarchal authority and relations of ruling in rural Southern and Central Punjab.

Tibba Channa's rigid feudal structure and the almost absolute power the Jams exercised over the bodies of the poor and the landless in the village allowed little possibility for the challenging of relations of domination and subjugation. Mai Dahay's deviance from gender norms, and her attempt at negotiating power relations, thus

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<sup>37</sup> A variation of the title "numberdar" which literally means one who keeps numbers. This post is a residue of the colonial past. Numberdars are basically liaisons between the village and administrative officials. They keep records in the village and assist in tax collection. Larger villages have more than one numberdars.

remained restricted to taking on a role associated with men only in contexts where she had the support of the feudal powers. On the other hand, the more fragmented community basis and loose nature of authority structures in Akalipur provided Tahira Jatti more rein for her coercion and subversion. The very fact that her village itself was electrified and had paved streets, and was connected to district headquarters and other key towns in the region through easily accessible roads and transportation allowed for a broader scope of her activities. Tahira Jatti's espousal of norms for proper maidenly conduct did at first appear at odds with the relatively "modern" context of her life as well as her deviance from gender norms. However, both her stance towards the playing down of women's sexuality and her sense of entitlement towards her self-chosen role as corrupt transgressor and trespasser were curiously reflective of discourses associated with the relations of ruling in the postcolonial nation-state (Khattak, 1994), relations that remain characterized by the domination of Central Punjab (Rouse, 1998). The taking on and taking up of power for Tahira Jatti involved controlling land, money, and women's bodies, even as she championed the cause of greater mobility and livelihood opportunities for women.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This essay centers on girls and women who defy gender norms and are perceived as deviant, difficult, or different by their communities in rural Punjab, even as it pluralizes and historicizes these performances of rebellious, unruly selves by attending to the locations of these girls and women within multi-layered relations of domination and subjugation. Motivated by critiques of imperialist research paradigms,<sup>38</sup> I eschew sweeping generalizations about women's defiance of norms, and situate my insights squarely within specific interactions and conversations generating the analysis, sharing with the reader particular threads and contours that help develop the argument put forth in this paper. Although eventually it is my voice, the voice of a "senior researcher" in the project that gets privileged, the intent is to represent research participants as co-constructors of knowledge, including knowledge of their own and other peoples' agency, and its manifestations in various temporal and spatial contexts. This knowledge, like mine, remains partial; incomplete, fragmented, and even contradictory, embedded within gendered discourses of proper conduct, appropriate "place", and respect, mediated by village level class and caste-based hierarchies, and configurations of identity and difference, which are in their turn shaped by more macro relations of power.

Even as the girls and women at the center of this paper remain the "outsiders within" (Rouse, 1998, p. 660) the postcolonial nation-state as well as their own communities, their efforts at actualizing their desires, whether for more freedom, economic independence, creative expression, or simply power, are circumscribed by their class, caste, religious, and regional geographic positioning. The contours and scope of their agency, including its limitations, its contradictions, and its absence in certain

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<sup>38</sup> The ongoing feminist project of destabilizing imperialist epistemological and methodological approaches involves reframing knowledge-production exercises at different levels, from the conceptualizing of the research project to its writing-up and finally its dissemination and application (see, Lather, 1991). Broadly speaking, feminist researchers in different quarters have stressed the need for relational methodologies and representation strategies that make explicit this relational underpinning, plus the imperative to provide textured, in-depth, accounts of women's lives that highlight how women's experiences are shaped by multi-leveled power relations ranging from the local to the global.

contexts, are facilitated by material realities created by the particular power relations framing their everyday lives. These accounts and performances of resistance can be used as entry points to an understanding of the multiple forms of violence, structural<sup>39</sup> and direct, that framed the deviance as well as the norms upholding the status quo in various parts of postcolonial rural Punjab.

The two flowers, girls who wandered into out-of-bound spaces, and spoke of taboo topics, risked different kinds of consequences when they defied boundaries. Farzana's membership in the ruling kinship group afforded her some protection, although that security remained contingent on the presence of her father. The vivacious Saadia's *Kammi Kameen* background made her more vulnerable to direct physical threats. For the sensitive Farzana, her residence in a remote village in Southern Punjab made neglect a more likely outcome, represented, for instance, by moves on the part of household members to withdraw financial support for healthcare, as they did in the case of her tuberculosis stricken father. As unmarried women/girls from poorer families, their courage, competence, and creativity notwithstanding, they were representatives of the most vulnerable segment of the rural female population, both in terms of the risk of direct physical harm and the slower but also potentially fatal structural abandonment (Chaudhry, 2009).

The queens' rise to power denote years of struggle against gender norms that restrict women to domestic spaces. Yet their individual sagas of resistance and their initiatives to extend the educational horizons of their students, including those from *Kammi Kameen* families, remain qualified by their enmeshment within postcolonial webs of powers. Not only was their agency, including their rebellion, made possible through the class and caste positioning of their families in Northern and Central Punjab, but they themselves subscribed to hierarchical modes of thought, replicating religion, class, caste, and gender-based discriminatory practices, which could be classified as violence, within their classrooms and in their interactions with other villagers.

The two goons, definitely more reflexive about their stances than the three headmistresses, nevertheless acquired their status as powerful women in their contexts, through strategic alliances with the ruling classes, and the harassment of the least powerful strata in their regions. Their critical understanding of oppressive structures and their own place and relationship with respect to these led them to carve out niches for themselves within systems of inequality generated by those structures. By virtue of her positioning in Central Punjab, with its more dispersed multiple power bases, Tahira Jatti's performance of unwomanly conduct as an aggressive troublemaker exhibited a wider scope: she organized to challenge the ascendancy of a local influential and took over public property in addition to terrorizing women from *Kammi Kameen* and Christian households. However, for Tahira, and for Mai Dahay, who did display some solidarity with the lower classes and other women through her assistance towards women giving birth in her neighborhood, dominance was maintained by adhering to the corrupt and violent norms and practices of the masculinist, patriarchal cultures in which their lives were embedded.

Ultimately, the challenges to gendered norms enacted by my research participants did not fundamentally subvert the status quo or radically overhaul the heterosexual

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<sup>39</sup> Structural violence refers to the systemic "everyday forms of violence that become normalized and naturalized" (Chaudhry, 2004, p. 260).

contract in their contexts. Possibilities of justice and egalitarian change were overwhelmed by post colonial realities: the collusion of multi-leveled power relations, from the local to the national to the global, ensure that Third World women's bodies remain restricted to their proper place. The girls' success at generating spaces of relative freedom in the midst of intense gendered violence continued to be precarious, while the women's entanglement with hegemonic norms and discourses in their communities, including norms that justified harm to the weak and discourses attributed to Islam that sought to control female bodies, forestalled the potential of sustained, more widespread transformation of gender norms. The disruption or interruption of gender norms in these cases, then, were either overshadowed by the threat of violence, or co-opted by the imposition of others vector of identities, such as caste, class, or affiliation with repressive state apparatuses, such as the police, in Tahira Jatti's case, that further reinforced relations of domination and subjugation.

Still, keeping in mind Sarkar's (2004, p. 318) caution against "looking for feminism," the imposition of *our* norms on our research participants, I want to conclude this paper by reiterating the significance of attempting to understand rural Punjabi women's deviance, regardless of its perceived efficaciousness, within the specificity of their life circumstances, and their social and geographical locations. The focus on resistance and transgression helps to debunk myths of the passive rural Muslim woman: the strength and capacity for critical consciousness of the girls and women represented in this discussion remains unquestionable. In addition, the contextualization of that resistance within postcolonial relations of power, shows how the violence in and around their lives constrains women's agency, but also constitutes them as subjects who derive their agency as members of a particular caste, class, village, and region. What is, in fact, highlighted is the imperative for feminist scholarly and advocacy enterprises to work with notions of empowerment that interpellate women simultaneously as unique, thinking individuals, and experiencing members of particular stratified communities framed by larger national and global histories in order to challenge structural impediments to women's agency in particular contexts. In the global post 9/11 anti-Muslim scenarios, it is even more pressing that our theorizing be based on nuanced, detailed accounts that resist the "mundane othering of so-called terrorist parts of the world" (Chaudhry and Bertram, 2009, p. 309).

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