

In the Name of Honour. A Memoir

Mukhtar Mai (with Marie-Thérèse Cuny) [Translated by Linda Coverdale; London: Virago, 2007]

Introduction

Before 1947 Pakistan was part of India and although it is a Muslim country the caste system still operates, as this true story strongly indicates. Mukhtar Mai was born into the peasant Gujar¹ caste. The names of a number of cities and towns in Pakistan indicate the presence of Gujars, for example, Gujranwala and Gujrat.

The subject-matter of the book ensures that there are rewards in reading it. However, it is not a particularly well-written book. It is very repetitive and, since it is so preoccupied with what this story can do for promoting women's rights, the analysis of Pakistani society is shallow and might easily give the false impression that shame-honour culture and the system of arranged marriages are completely without merit. Yet, without doubt, the book does succeed in showing up a disgraceful aspect of Pakistani society.

Those who want to lay the blame for what happened at the foot of the door of Islam will be disappointed. For the book involves no critique of Islam or any attempt to assess what role it might play in the dreadful treatment of women described in the book. Indeed, Mukhtar Mai herself, never points the finger of Islam and remains a devout Muslim.

A Male Society

I lived in Pakistan for seven years and have driven in the Muzaffargarh District of the southern Punjab where Mukhtar Mai was born and raised. I have visited many similar villages in the Punjab. Pakistan is very much a male-dominated society. Except for some of the more Western areas in the big cities, it is relatively uncommon to see women walking on the streets or see them serving in shops. Women are largely confined to the home (*purdah*) and when there is occasion for them to be in public situations they will cover their heads, often with the *burqa*.

Urdu is the national language of Pakistan and most men in the Punjab can speak this language, even though normally their heart language is Punjabi. However, many women, because they did not venture much outside their homes and villages, cannot speak much Urdu. In the case of Mukhtar Mai the only language she could speak was the very localized Saraiki. She was raised in a typical manner for a village woman, that is, completely illiterate. Yet this woman is now the founder of a primary school in her village. She explains the need for this:

My ambition to establish a girls' school in the village is very dear to my heart, and the idea occurred to me almost like a gift from God. I was trying to find a way to educate girls, to give them the courage to learn. The mothers in the villages, don't do anything to help them, because they can't. Since a girl must help with the housework, the father doesn't plan on sending her to study. That's how things are. And in my remote province, what does a girl learn from her mother? How to make chapaties, cook rice and lentils, wash clothing and hang it up to dry on palm trunks, cut grass for the animals, harvest wheat and sugarcane, prepare tea, put the youngest children to bed, fetch water from the pump. Our mothers have done all these things before us, and

their mothers did the same before them. And then it's time to be married, to have children... That's how life goes on from woman to woman. (75-6)

But what motivated this illiterate village woman to embark on such a noble venture? An horrific event occurred in the life of this woman that exposed to her the damage done to society by a kind of male domination which exploits women and often treats them as having little, if any, inherent value.

The Horrific Crime

It is common for Pakistani Muslims to justifiably criticize the West because of the overt sexual promiscuity and immorality that characterizes it. Indeed, on the basis of exposure to Western videos, pirate copies of which are easily procured in the bazaars, there are Pakistani Muslims who assume all or most Western women are sexually loose. Since many Pakistani Muslims erroneously assume that the West is basically synonymous with Christianity, or the product of Christianity, it is often said, against Christianity, that Islam is the only religion which truly honours women, because it alone protects them and their honour from sexual exploitation.

That might be the theory. But this real-life story, that took place on June 22, 2002, flies in the face of such male representations of the status of women in Pakistan. This book does highlight the bloodcurdling experience of one Pakistani woman and, in the telling, exposes the tragic deprivation of dignity and honour experienced by vast numbers of Pakistani women.

Mukhtar Mai means "respected big sister" but the woman born Mukhtaran Bibi in the village of Meerwala around 1972 was treated with gross disrespect in her own village. She was not merely denied protection, but, though known by all to be completely innocent, was ordered by the village council to submit to gang-rape by four members of the dominating family in the village, the higher caste Mastois. This was supposedly a 'just' way of restoring the honour of the Mastois since, it was absurdly alleged, her 12 year old brother, Shakur, from the lower peasant Gujar caste, had damaged their honour when he acted with sexual impropriety towards a Mastoi girl aged over 20 named Salma. His crime? He had spoken to the girl.

The Mastois then kidnapped, beat and sodomised the boy, to humiliate him. The boy's father filed a complaint with the local police. When the police appeared on the Mastois' doorstep the Mastois were outraged that a Gujar peasant should defy them. So, ironically, it was the Mastois who now insisted that *their* honour must be restored.

Mukhtar Mai finds herself called to stand before the village council, hoping her submission will persuade the Mastois to withdraw their foul accusations against the boy and effect his release from prison. She arrives to find herself surrounded by Mastois armed with rifles and pistols, determined to enact their own 'justice', applying the principle of *zina* for *zina* ("fornication" for "fornication"). The village council (*jirga panchayat*) caves into the demands of the Mastois. Four men - Abdul Khaliq, Gulam Farid, Allah Dita and Mohammed Faiz - drag Mukhtar into an empty stable and repeatedly rape her, eventually throwing her out half naked in full sight of the whole village. Even then, it was only after paying the police 12,000 rupees, an enormous sum of money for this poor Gujar family, that the boy was released.

It is now socially expected of Mukhtar that the honourable thing for her to do is to commit suicide. For a while she is close to doing just this, but then her anger drives her to seek justice.

Positives for Islam

It will surprise some readers to discover that Islam does come out of this story with some credits. It is the local mullah, Abdul Razzaq, who tries to defuse the looming inter-family feud by proposing that Shakur be given in marriage to Salma, a suggestion that enrages the Mastoi chief. After the gang-raping of Mukhtar the mullah denounced what had happened as a sin and a disgrace for the entire community in the sermon he delivered during Friday prayers. Later, it is the mullah who encourages Mukhtar to seek justice and confirms her story when she is interviewed by a judge.

At no point does Mukhtar's Islamic faith waver. She constantly talks about how much the Qur'an means to her and it is a major weakness of this book that it provides little explanation as to which verses or teachings in the Qur'an were valued by Mukhtar. It is interesting to note the various ways in which Mukhtar shows her reverence for the Qur'an. When, on the fateful day, she is called to appear before the village council, she goes clutching the Qur'an to her breast, trusting that it will protect her. She claims that even though she could not read or write she had learned the Qur'an by heart. She also mentions that she had made a practice of teaching Qur'anic verses to village children. She had come to view the Qur'an as her strength.

Following her humiliation she speaks of how she pictured Allah:

I pictured God as a king: he was tall, and strong, seated on a divan, surrounded by angels, and he forgave people. He granted mercy to those who had done good deeds, and he sent the others to hell or their wickedness. (22)

She recalls that as she sat imprisoned in her room, Allah was her only comfort. For the next four to five days after her terrible experience Mukhtar claims that she recited the Qur'an without eating or sleeping. She speaks not only of her immense grief but also of how guilty she felt, while realizing her rapists felt no guilt at all.

At one point she speaks of how her illiteracy came to infuriate her, but saying, "The Koran is my one treasure: it is written inside me, in my memory, and it's the only book I have."

Embarrassments for the Justice System

When journalists arrive, Mukhtar senses that she must take advantage of this situation in her quest for justice. However, the first obstacle she faces is the conduct of the local police who in various ways try to stop her taking the matter further. She describes these supposed custodians of the law in this way:

...in our province, the police are directly controlled by the upper castes. Policemen act as the fierce guardians of tradition, allied with the tribal authorities. Whatever decision a jirga makes will be accepted and backed up by the police. It's impossible to charge an influential family with a crime if the police consider the matter a village affair, especially if the victim is a woman. (27)

She relates how the police exploited her illiteracy, asking her questions but instead of writing down her answers, creating their own account and getting her to place her fingerprint on the concocted document which, of course, she was incapable of

reading. She tells how the police from time to time would bring her to the station and make her sit all day in order to keep her away from journalists. She tells of attempts of the police to persuade her to withdraw her complaints. She tells how she was made to put her thumbprint on blank pieces of paper.

At last she is summoned to tell a judge what has happened and he receives confirmation of her story from the mullah. Later when the accused are tried in court six of them are condemned to death and ordered to pay 50,000 rupees in damages and costs.

But on March 3, 2005, to Mukhtar Mai's horror, the Lahore High Court acquitted five of the accused, ordering that they be released. Only one defendant remained in jail, condemned to life imprisonment. On March 5 Mukhtar Mai holds a press conference expressing her determination to appeal to President Musharraf himself if need be. On March 7 she marches with 3000 women to demand justice. On March 17 having heard that the Mastois have been released from prison and fearing for her life, she travels to Islamabad where she meets with the Minister of the Interior. The next day she meets with the Prime Minister. The result is that a new arrest warrant is issued and the men are returned to prison pending consideration of Mukhtar's appeal. On June 28 the Supreme Court of Islamabad agrees to reopen the case.

Male-Female Relationships

Mukhtar Mai's life story opens up a window through which can be seen Pakistani culture. She relates how she learned at around age 10 that it was forbidden to talk to boys and notes that she never broke that taboo. She also tells how girls aren't allowed to play with boys even when they are very small, commenting, "A kid found playing marbles with his little girl cousin gets beaten by his mother" (91).

She notes how mothers-in-law often cry out such things as, "You don't listen to your husband! You're not serving him fast enough!" Though such comments may be directed at daughters-in-law they simultaneously teach the youngest unmarried girls, as they overhear such remarks, what is expected of them. Mukhtar observes,

Aside from prayer and the recitation of the Koran, that's the only education we receive. And it teaches us distrust, obedience, submission, fear, abject respect for men. It teaches us to forget ourselves. (92)

Through an ill-conceived and short-lived arranged marriage Mukhtar Mai was wedded, at the age of 18, to a man whose face she had never seen until the day of her marriage. She observes that in Pakistan a young woman is not free to choose a husband for herself, noting,

Some women who have taken that risk have been threatened, humiliated, beaten, and sometimes even killed, although there are new laws that support this right to choose, in theory. Islamic law does not support this right, however, and each caste has its own traditions. Couples who decide for themselves have huge difficulties proving the legality of their marriage. The woman, for example, may be accused of *zina*, a sin that includes adultery and sex without the sanction of marriage. She may then be condemned to be stoned to death. We are constantly being caught between the different legal systems of our religion and our government, not to mention - for extra complications - the tribal system, since each tribe has its own rules that completely ignore the official law, and sometimes even religious law.

Mukhtar explains that Pakistani mothers do not tell their daughters what goes on in a marriage and do not prepare them for the sexual relationship. From the very start of her own marriage Mukhtar discovered she did not like her husband very much. She also points out that only the husband may grant a divorce. If a woman begins proceedings for a divorce in a state court of law the husband's family may consider itself 'dishonoured' and demand 'punishment.' In Mukhtar's case the marriage contract had specified that her husband should live with Mukhtar's family, but he decided instead to move in with his brother's family. So Mukhtar returned home after barely a month and managed to get a divorce.

This book highlights problems with the system of arranged marriages and also illustrates terrible things done against those who break with this system and opt for a love marriage. Mukhtar can speak of the case where a woman married for love only for her husband to be murdered by her brothers for staining the family honour. She can speak of *jirgas* condemning women for trying to wed freely, even though the national law permits it. She can speak of families taking the husband of a love marriage to court and maliciously charging him with rape. However, it would not be fair to conclude from this that the system of arranged marriages is inherently evil and that a society in which love marriages prevail is to be preferred. The book does not involve any in-depth analysis of such social structures nor provide a balanced assessment of advantages and disadvantages.

III-Treatment of Women in Pakistani Society

Understandably, what happened to Mukhtar has been used by many to highlight the plight of women in Pakistani and Muslim societies generally. Mukhtar herself has much to say by way of explaining how women are often regarded in her country:

A woman is nothing more than an object of exchange, from birth to marriage. According to custom, she has no rights. That is how I was raised, and no one ever told me that Pakistan had a constitution, laws, and rights written down in a book. (27-8)

She speaks of how difficult it was to tell her story over and over again to male policemen:

With a policewoman, it would be less agonizing, but the terrible thing is, here there are almost no women in the police and the judicial system. Just men. (34)

She talks of one occasion where she is made to sit in a room without any furniture, not knowing what she was doing there or what would happen next:

And since no one talks to me or explains anything at all to me, I have plenty of time to think about the way women are treated. Men are the ones who 'know'; women must simply keep quiet and wait. Why tells us anything? Men make the decisions, rule, act, judge. I think of the goats tied up in courtyards to keep them from wandering around the countryside. I don't count for more than a goat here, even if I haven't got a cord looped around my neck. (35)

When what had happened to her became worldwide news, Mukhtar found herself speaking with journalists and women from various human rights organizations. Through such interaction she came to learn of other rapes and acts of violence against women, reinforcing her commitment to see justice. She tells of a woman who became pregnant after being raped by her brother-in-law. She did not repudiate the child and in 2002 was initially sentenced to be stoned to death because the child constituted proof of

zina. The rapist has gone scot-free while the victim, at the time of the book's writing, was still in prison, and facing the prospect of being there for many more years.

There are women all over Pakistan who, having for some reason incurred the wrath of their husbands, have their noses cut off, have acid thrown in their faces or are "accidentally" killed in the explosion of a cooking-gas canister.

It is common for many maltreated women to seek Mukhtar Mai's help and for her to have as many as a dozen women sleeping in her bedroom on any one night. Mukhtar's close friend Naseem comments,

Men and women are equals. We have the same duties. I'm well aware that Islam gives men some superiority, but here, men take advantage of that to dominate us completely. A woman must obey her father, her brother, her uncle, her husband, and finally every man in her village, the province, and the entire country! (86)

Naseem goes on to speak of the husband who won't let his wife see a movie because he wants to keep her in ignorance so he can control her. For many a Pakistani wife, Naseem explains, "the world exists only through her husband" (87).

Reflecting on the deplorable judgment of the *jirga* Mukhtar complains about the exclusion of women from meetings, "even though they are the ones - as mothers, grandmothers, the custodians of daily life - who understand family problems the best. Men's contempt for their intelligence is what pushes women aside" (108).

Mukhtar also observes that it has been common for inter-caste and inter-tribe marriages to be arranged with a view to reducing confrontations by intermingling bloodlines. She comments, "The present reality is quite different. Married under such conditions, a wife is even more mistreated, rejected by the other women, trapped in slavery."

International Fame and Support for Mukhtar Mai

As she becomes famous and commended for her courage, Mukhtar Mai also becomes the recipient of generous monetary grants. Immediately, she decides she wants to use this money to establish a school for girls in her village. With government help her first school is opened by the end of 2002. Additional donations are received from overseas. By the close of 2005 her school was attended not merely by 200 girls but also 160 boys.

Naseem, the forthright daughter of a policeman from a neighbouring village, becomes Mukhtar's close friend, personal supporter and headmistress of the school.

The Pakistani Government and Damage Control

The worldwide broadcasting of this dreadful incident reflects badly on Pakistan and the Pakistani government goes into damage control mode. The Minister of Justice stated on British TV that the verdict of the *jirga* was an act of terrorism; that the tribal assembly was an illegal body; and that the guilty should be brought before an antiterrorism court.

The book tells of an attempt made by President Musharraf to prevent Mukhtar from speaking at a US conference, presumably because of the embarrassment this might cause for Pakistan. Indeed, the book claims that President Musharraf's close friend, Brigadier Ijaz Shah threatened a Pakistani-American physician who supported Mukhtar

Mai that he would arrange for she and Mukhtar Mai to be killed if Mukhtar stirred up trouble. In 2005 the Pakistani government drew international attention to what had happened to Mukhtar Mai when it cancelled a speech she was scheduled to give at the UN. At another time her passport was taken from her and she was forbidden to travel, evidently for fear she would give the nation a bad image abroad.

Concluding Remarks

Islam developed in a societal context where male honour was of immense importance. To this extent at least Islam is a syncretistic religion, in that it has moulded itself around this core value. Mukhtar Mai would like to believe the Qur'an is opposed to the denigration of women that she sees occurring all too often in her own society. But it would appear that there are few resources, if any, in an Islam defined by the Qur'an and Hadith, to address what has become a glaring problem in Muslim societies. Male rhetoric might insist that there is a commitment to safeguarding female honour, but to the extent that there is substance in such claims, it would seem that all too often here too what really matters are the implications female honour has for defending and promoting male honour.

¹ This is variously spelt. Variants include Gurjara and Goojar.