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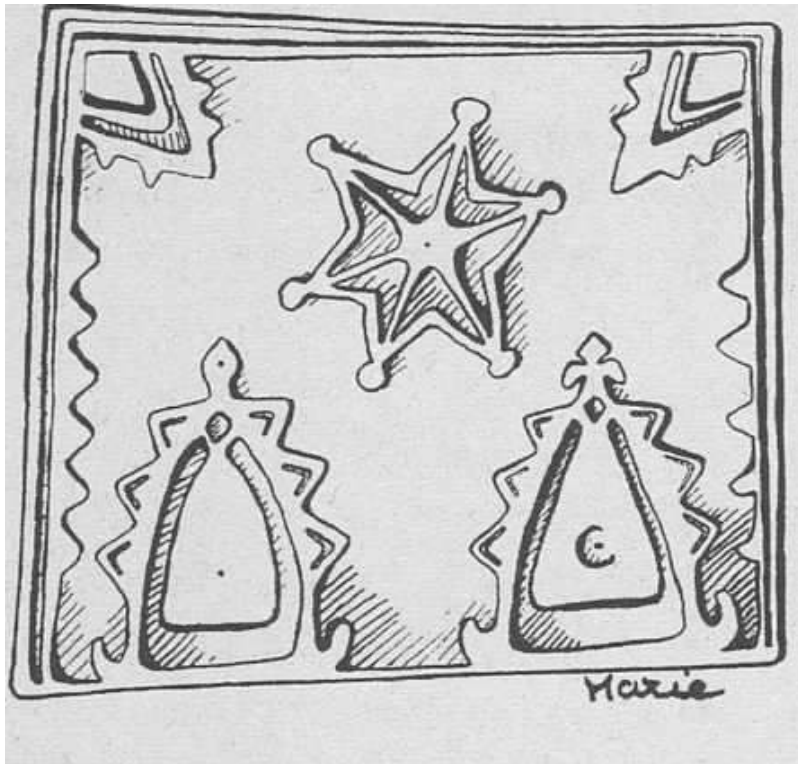
- 1 Born near Mingora, in the Swat Valley of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, Nessim Barone moved to Switzerland eight months ago with her Swiss husband, Abdullah, whom she married at age 14. Married now for twenty years, she and her husband have lived and travelled extensively in the northern areas of Pakistan and have moved to Geneva to provide a better education for their children. She came to the conference on "Créativité, femmes et développement" to speak to us about the important role of painting as a form of creative expression and solidarity amongst Pukhtun women.
- 2 The article is based on the presentation given by Nessim during the two days of the conference, as well as a subsequent in-depth interview with her and her husband.

## The Pukhtun of Swat

- 3 "Switzerland of the Himalayas" is the prestigious name bestowed by the Pakistani Tourist Board upon the Swat Valley (Lindholm 1982: 2). Located in the north of Pakistan, near the border with Afghanistan, Swat is famous for its breath-taking views of the Himalayas as well as its people: the Pukhtun (also known as Pathans and Pashtouns).
- 4 Due to the remoteness of the region, the Pukhtun tribe has been able to develop and maintain its distinct cultural identity and autonomy despite being subjected to different rules throughout its history.
- 5 Although the Swat Valley joined the newly-formed state of Pakistan in 1947, it was allowed to keep its internal autonomy and was in fact not fully integrated into the country until 1969. Even today the Pukhtuns live virtually independent of the Pakistani

state; they swear not by national law but by their own unwritten code of honour known as the Pukhtunwali which has its roots in centuries-old traditions. In culture, language and social customs, this tribe has far more in common with its Afghani neighbours than with the rest of Pakistan.

- 6 The local traditions, as well as the strict adherence to Islam, serve to limit the degree of freedom of expression Pukhtun women have. They are upheld as a symbol of the tribe's honour, and yet at the same time are virtual pawns in the making and breaking of inter and intra-tribal alliances (Lindholm 1982: 129). For the Pukhtuns, a strong patriarchal society, the place of women is restricted to the home, a phenomenon that has intensified with the encroachment of industrialisation and the media into the area<sup>1</sup>.
- 7 The past two decades have seen tremendous changes in the Swat Valley. National economic priorities and policies have led to a drastic shift from subsistence to cash crop production and textile industries have sprung up in the area of Mingora during the past two decades, only to close down just as rapidly. This has resulted in severe land degradation coupled with an increase in rural unemployment. There is a continuous exodus of young men leaving Swat to seek employment in the urban centres of Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, or the nearby Gulf States, their remittances providing a vital influx of capital into the local economy (Lindholm 1982: 9).
- 8 Another more significant trend is the growing presence of media in the region. Previously isolated from the rest of the country, the Pukhtuns now have the lifestyles of urban Karachites and Lahorites brought into even the remotest of living rooms thanks to television<sup>2</sup>.
- 9 All these processes have brought about a change in the Pukhtun community but sadly enough the benefits for women have been few and far between. In a society that already gave few privileges to women, the situation has become one meriting serious concern<sup>3</sup>.
- 10 One original and revealing way to approach the deterioration of women's status is to study how their role as artists in the community has been reduced.



Illustrations : Marie Thorndahl

## Creativity within confinement

- 11 The Pukhtuns are famous in Pakistan and in South Asia in general for their rich cultural heritage. Pukhtun designs and motifs on jewellery, cloth and other objects are renowned throughout the region. Thus it is no surprise that the society accords great importance to the aesthetic appearance of its homes and mosques.
- 12 The art of house decoration has traditionally been the domain of women. Passed on from mother to daughter, Pukhtun women take great pride and care in the decoration of their homes. Using the earth as their palette they paint the earthen walls and roofs of their houses with elaborate flower motifs and other intricate designs with the aid of easily accessible material like straw, cow dung, shiny mica and naturally coloured earth.
- 13 What can be interpreted as a simple task of adornment elsewhere becomes here a venue for women to use their ingenuity to express their creativity and individuality in the only space they can truly call their own. (The interior of the house where women meet and cook has restricted entry and no male is allowed in this area).
- 14 The painting of a house is festive affair, a rare occasion for women to get together and take respite from their busy schedules. The decorating process can last anywhere from three days (for a small bungalow) up to three weeks (for a larger house). During this time the women form what is called an *ashar* (a co-operative work group) and, as Nessim recounted, their days are spent working, eating and socialising in the total absence of males. The lady of the house is assisted by her daughters, sisters, cousins, neighbours and friends and it is an opportunity for women not only to share their talents but also their lives.

- 15 It is in fact the only outlet of creative expression allowed to women in Pukhtun society. Lacking access to public space and activities, the only sphere left for creativity and discussion is in their homes<sup>4</sup>. Any access to public areas is only allowed to women if they observe *pardah* (a veil that covers the face and body) and are accompanied by male members of their family. Furthermore when asked if women are entitled to possess their own land and/or capital, Nessim's reply to both was no, leaving one with the realisation that women are dependent on men for their every need.
- 16 With the fairly recent changes in lifestyles due to the expansion of urbanisation, even this outlet of artistic and personal expression is being lost. As Nessim took pains to point out, the decoration of houses by women is a dying art surviving in only a few scattered villages: "In the cities this way of art is finished, it exists only in small villages like Ahmadiyan, Fathipoor, Bahrain and Kalam". In the latter women still have some degree of mobility as they are needed to work in the fields, gather materials from nearby forests or else seek employment as seamstresses in urban areas to supplement the rural household income.
- 17 However the picture painted of the urban women in Swat is a bleaker one. Although their standard of living has risen, their freedom of expression and movement has been greatly curtailed. Whereas before these women did certain tasks like cooking, painting or working in the fields, they are now able and expected to pay someone else to do these very same tasks, but yet are left with no replacements to fill their time<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, with an increasing social value placed on capital accumulation and monetarisation, Pukhtun society (much like Victorian England) holds in high esteem a man whose wife does not have to work in the home.
- 18 There are several reasons for this change and although the region has seen a rise in Islamic fervour it would nonetheless be too simplistic to consider religion as a sole explanatory factor<sup>6</sup>. Islam has been an integral part of Pukhtun life for centuries, and though it is central in accounting for the general submission of women, it does not provide sufficient explanation for the gradual extinction of this form of creativity.
- 19 More profound reasons are to be found in the recent industrialisation of the area. With the instalment of factories and the improvement in infrastructure, goods that were previously rare in Swat are now easily available. Television sets, radios and household electrical appliances currently saturate the markets of Swat and what is not available in the local stores is willingly brought over from abroad by men working in the Gulf States. Nessim explained that when the men return from abroad or come home to Swat on vacation they like to surround themselves with the same luxury items as they are used to in their places of employment as well as be able to show off their newly-made wealth to the "locals".
- 20 With the introduction of these new appliances also comes more sophisticated equipment for painting like synthetic paints, various types and sizes of paintbrushes and other artistic material. The problem arises due to the fact that the material is available in urban centres and as men have privileged access to the markets they are the ones who subsequently learn how to master the use of this new equipment.
- 21 Plus, with the introduction of cement in the local markets, the earthen walls of houses are gone and instead there is an increase in homes built with concrete. The end result of these changes being that more and more painting of homes is done by men using

equipment, techniques and even designs completely foreign to the women<sup>7</sup>. As Nessim so succinctly put it, “women don’t understand how to paint any more”.

- 22 This utilisation of new equipment and techniques is accompanied by a change in perceptions. Whereas previously a house decorated by women using natural materials was thought to be beautiful it is now considered common and rustic. There is a significant transformation in Pukhtun values. Anything modern (cement, synthetic colours, etc.) is considered sophisticated (including by women of Nessim’s generation) whereas the older practices are being shunned<sup>8</sup>. Of course there is also the added bonus of the rise in social status to be had if one can afford to have one’s house painted by a “professional” male rather than one’s wife.
- 23 This change in values and aesthetic judgements is largely due to the influence of the media. Pukhtun people now have direct access to life in the large cities of Pakistan and the Gulf States via satellite and returning labourers. There is a desire to emulate this “modern” lifestyle, thus explaining for example the accumulation of electronic appliances. As Nessim explained “everything is modern now and it is reaching even the mountain areas for women like modern things”.
- 24 The impact of the media and this modernisation on women is however a mixed one. On the one hand women are increasingly given access to information and innovations like the contraceptive pill that allows them to control the number of children they have. On the other hand, as Nessim pointed out, they have less occasions to meet and be creative and furthermore suffer from greater health problems due to these same contraceptives<sup>9</sup>.
- 25 As the painting is appropriated by men, women are left with fewer and fewer opportunities to work in solidarity with one another. The rising social inequalities due to differences in income have led to an intensification of jealousy and rivalry between the women themselves. Jewellery and electronic goods have become status symbols and sources of tension in a society already historically marked by competition over scarce resources.
- 26 There is an uncomfortable social disintegration which seems to be occurring in Swat for both men and women but whereas men have access to public spheres and outlets for their expression, women are denied access to them. As Lindholm points out, despite all the modernisation processes occurring, there is a certain sense of “inevitable continuity” and “timelessness” in Pukhtun society (Lindholm 1982: 10). This is especially evident in the case of women. Deeply rooted patriarchal traditions and the practice of orthodox Islam have ensured that women’s role in society has remained a subservient one. Modernisation is accepted but to certain limits defined by men.
- 27 Thus, although a woman may be allowed to take contraceptive pills (for children have become costly), divorce is still taboo and strictly prohibited in Pukhtun society (Lindholm 1982: 146). Even though a girl may have access to education (mainly primary and religious) it is only restricted to the wealthy few, and even then it has as its objective to increase her “market value” as a bride. More television sets are bought but it is still considered socially acceptable for a man to practice domestic violence in order to prove his virility (*ibid.*: 60).
- 28 These are just a few of the underlying tensions and contradictions existing in Pukhtun society, a society, like many others, being confronted with drastic changes in its cultural values and norms. A backlash to this encroachment of urban “Pakistani” values

is to further restrict the role of women. Traditionally women have always reflected the honour of a Pukhtun tribe, a symbol of its pride, and little has changed. If a woman is veiled and behind closed doors then it is reassurance to society that traditional values are still very much intact. The malaise arises when one considers that there is a notable difference in being surrounded by earthen walls and being able to paint and being behind concrete, contenting yourself with “watching TV and dressing up all day” (Nessim’s words).

- 29 The younger generation of women, growing up under the influence of this modernisation, are evidently adopting different attitudes from their mothers but the outlets for their expression remain limited. Nessim feels younger women in Swat are becoming more and more like their counterparts in Karachi or Lahore for “they watch the same TV and wear the same clothes” (Nessim’s words). Nonetheless the price to pay for this “transformation” is high as they are increasingly stigmatised as “masculine” and/or “modern”. As previously stated, men still control the boundaries of what is acceptable with regard to a woman’s character and behaviour.
- 30 From Nessim’s interview one gets the uneasy feeling that Pukhtun society is currently an ever-changing hybrid of modernity and tradition but with women getting the burnt end of both. One cannot help but wonder what the future holds in store for Pukhtun women as modernisation robs them of a traditional path for expressing their creativity while simultaneously tradition prevents them from seeking new, alternative venues of expression.
- 31 Until the decoration of homes by women is recognised by society as being more than just a pastime and instead is legitimised as a manifestation of a woman’s creativity, assertiveness and solidarity with other women it is in danger of being lost forever. Nessim and her husband, when asked about the future of the Pukhtun women, both emphasised that although modernisation is unavoidable it nonetheless results in a loss of a certain Pashtun identity held by women for centuries before.
- 32 If this article rings with gloom and doomsday prophecies it is because the reality necessitates sounding this cry of alarm. Unless women in Pukhtun society (and Pakistan in general) are given more freedom of expression, women like Nessim Barone, who highlight the importance of the liberating role of art to women in confined spaces, will be no more.
- 33 Not wishing to end on a completely despairing tone, I would like to stress that for Nessim, Mingora and the Swat Valley are very much home. The land, the family and the support provided by the Pukhtun community all beckon her. It is there that she would like to live with her husband once the children are older. As she told me, “I don’t need a lot of pretty things, I just truly love my country”.

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For an excellent analysis and description of Mingora see *Urban Environment Management in Intermediate Cities: Case Study of Mingora, Pakistan*, IUED and Sustainable Development Policy Institute (Islamabad, Pakistan), Geneva, April 1996.

## NOTES

1. A Pukhtun saying is “Women belong in the house or in the grave” (Lindholm 1982: 113).
2. One anecdote Nessim shared with me was when she went to visit a family living in a remote mountain area near Mingora, she was astonished to find everyone, *including the farm goats and cattle*, watching television!
3. Another Pukhtun saying is: “Our women make bread and produce children. They need do no more. They are like cows in their stalls” (*ibid.*: 163). Furthermore, even though Islamic law provides inheritance for women, the Pukhtuns do not apply it in practice as was pointed out during our interview. A further cause for concern is the high illiteracy rate of women in Mingora (77%).
4. For instance women are not permitted to attend the local assembly known as the *jirgas* where important decisions about tribal affairs are made.
5. “In the cities, if you own fields you pay someone to work on them”, Nessim told me, and as her husband added, “with money, they (the women) pay others to do what they used to do”.
6. The rise in fundamentalist Islam is due to the recent events in Afghanistan as well as the increasing power of the Jamaat-i-Islami right wing religious political party in Swat.
7. What is interesting is the change in designs pointed out by Nessim’s husband. Whereas before floral motifs were used, now the “in-thing” is to have English and Rococo designs.
8. As Nessim herself said “I also find it (a house painted in the modern style) pretty and it’s easier as it is done by somebody else”.
9. Nessim mentioned that even though before women had ten children they worked hard and were more mobile whereas now with fewer children that are often plagued with ill health due to the contraceptives. “They are often out of breath from doing the least bit of work, and are weak, they are not like they used to be. Before they were stronger” (Nessim’s words).

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