

GENDERED MOBILITY: ONE WOMAN'S STORY

by

ROBIN RAMSAY FOWLER

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1987

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of Anthropology and Sociology)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

April, 1994

©Robin Ramsay Fowler

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

(Signature)

Department of Anthropology

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date April 25, 1994

Abstract

The turnings, experiences and adaptations of one woman's evolving life history show the degree to which mobility can be achieved and, when necessary, camouflaged in a variety of situations where the physical and ideological movement of women is severely constrained. As a thematic device, gendered mobility offers a useful lens through which gendered experience can be viewed. The experiences of a woman living in a conservative Muslim community in South Asia frame a vocation of mobility and mobilisation. The story reveals a situated and subjective perspective recorded through the methods of life history and participant observation. From an empowered sense of self, one woman identifies meaning and seeks to empower others through her vision and the processes of community development.

Keywords: gender, women, social mobility, life history, community development, South Asia, Islam

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgement	iv
Preface - by Tanveer Jahan	v
INTRODUCTION	1
Context	7
Methods	11
A Case of Mobility	15
Discussion	
The Story	40
Women as Others	41
A Case of One	42
Conclusion	48
Selected Bibliography	49

In appreciation of the mentors that give shape to my work - Dr. Martin Silverman, Dr. Helga Jacobson, Dr. Lloyd Baron, and the women who move to effect change.

Preface

by Tanveer Jahan

It feels both pretentious and singularly elating to scribble a few lines at the beginning of an academic dissertation focusing on the events, years, developments, in short the fragments of one's own life. The feeling of pretention can be brushed aside as the nature of the narrative is purely academic and not adulatory. However, the sentiments of honour lined with due modesty urge that the occasion be used to further the cause that has inspired the conscious struggle of a lifetime.

I was born and bred in a lower class, deeply religious and religiously conservative family of South Asia. Apart from turgid spectacles of *de trop* poverty, stifling ignorance and burgeoning legions of population, the lot of a female child in this part of the world is by no means enviable. Handicapped by loathsome gender discrimination, strict segregation, forced immobility, being a woman is to perpetually wiggle under the yoke of sub-human existence. Our involuntary orientation with the *zeitgeist* under the colonial masters did little to weaken the chains of obsolete traditions; consigning women to the meaningless drudgery of procreation and household chores with literally no option to realize their potential as creative human beings. I don't entertain any claims for a feat, sending trepidations in the spheres, but I have the gratification of a responsible human being who made a conscious decision to fight against the verdict of a biased and unjust polity. I don't have the making of a reformer, but in my limited capacity as an individual, I decided to transfer the fruit of my struggle to the less fortunate members of my society. Dictated by the fundamental tenets of my creed, the beneficiaries of my work as a professional trainer in social activism and community development were both men and women.

This is most heartening to see sociologists in the North turning to the dynamics of societies in the South. However, studying the exotic patterns of existence in alien societies is quite behind the cherished goal of an equity between the responsible souls in both the developed and the under-developed worlds

to create a truly equitable amity of human beings, transcending the differences of colour, creed, capital and consciousness. I have known Robin Fowler for quite some time and knowing her relieves one from formal expressions of gratitude and compliments. However, I must express the hope that the work in hand as well as her future as a professional anthropologist will help bring closer the people of our two countries; even if at varying tiers of socio-economic development.

As for myself, I am guarded against any feelings of complacency. There is no end to the Road Not Taken. Robin has taken pains to find the English version of my favourite poet, Ghalib. Let me quote, in a rather free translation, one of his couplets:

Finding it hard to face the faces that one met;
With dusk looming low and goals far in sight;
we lost ourselves in the labyrinths of struggle.

Tanveer Jahan
April 10, 1994

Introduction

There are many approaches to a discussion of gender. Described as "a field in its own right", gender studies has contributed to significant shifts in the thinking of several academic areas including anthropology, history and literary analysis (Strathern 1987:278). Feminists from these disciplines have argued against the authority of conventional approaches, calling "not merely for more knowledge to correct the apparent discrepancies, or even different knowledge, but a qualitatively different epistemology" (Whittaker 1994:3). To contribute to a new knowledge, alternative perspectives in anthropology are emerging that incorporate the many layers of gendered experience.

This paper presents an ethnographic glimpse of one woman's life and work with a focus on *gendered mobility*. Although reference to mobility in relation to women is frequently made in the literature (and is germane to most descriptions of female experience), and while social mobility is a common theme in sociological or anthropological inquiry, gendered mobility is not often treated as central outside of important works that study the complex traditions of *purdah* (and like seclusion practices of non-Islamic societies) that reveal dual concepts of honour and shame (See, for examples, Jeffery 1979; Mandelbaum 1988; Papanek 1982 and 1973; and Pastner 1990).

The use of gendered mobility as a thematic device offers the potential for a situated glance at the difference of experiences between men and women, between economic classes or ethnic groups, and among all players who are influenced by a common social order. As a broad category defined by Gordon, *gender* is a social and political construction, "...irreducible, not to be subsumed under class, race, ethnicity, cultural or national identity" (1988:12). For the purposes of this discussion, *mobility* is interpreted as the capability and facility of movement through social experience. This movement implies the concrete privileges of access to central services and opportunities such as education or work, as well as to the more elusive entitlements of voice and information. Restrictions, such as those imposed by historical influences and

by the existing system, intersect with a subjective interpretation of mobility as it is attempted or accomplished by the individual or the collective. In a world of differences "traversed with intersecting lines of power and resistance" (Mohanty 1991:2), gendered mobility can be seen as another "relational" (ibid.) term that divides along such lines. Studies of gendered mobility thus provide insight into situated lives and identities as they are composed in response to innumerable influences.

Gendered aspects of social movement relevant to this thesis include mobility as it is interpreted and used through economic class, politics, development, and activism; as it is managed through the vehicles of education, intellectual pursuit, professionalism, and travel; as it is construed through the traditions or interpretations of religion and morality; as it can be managed or manipulated through the cultural regulation of dress, forms of address, marriage and divorce; as a more subtle means to exercise voice and opportunity while enduring scrutiny within the limits of patriarchal models; and as women in the company of men who can be deciphered and rationalized as simply being 'like men'. Further relevant aspects of gendered mobility relate to personal identity, the construction of self, and the ability to creatively map direction among and around obstacles imposed by foreign influence, custom, politics, legislation, and religious prescription.

The aspects of gendered mobility listed above summarize observations made in 1993 during a nine week field experience with Tanveer Jahan, a community development worker in an Islamic community in South Asia, who was introduced to me by a mutual Canadian colleague. Some time after establishing a professional introduction through written correspondence, an opportunity arose for me to travel to South Asia as a research monitor with the same colleague, to review the operations of a small non-government organization (NGO) that employed Tanveer. Our terms of reference involved an annual visit to the field as a part of a monitoring contract with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) which provided operational funding for the organization's office and staff of approximately twelve members. My modestly funded participation in this monitoring mission was to offer a more in depth perspective of

the program than was normally attainable in short visits to the field. Additional work with the staff during my stay aimed to discuss planning for the qualitative evaluation of their programs' impact on women. The scope of this more qualitative research, however, was to be determined in the potential opportunity for me to conduct concurrent academic research relating to women working in community-based development. In preparation for this trip, I wrote to Tanveer to ask if she would be willing to work with me during and beyond the scope of the monitoring project, on research that would contribute to the preparation of a master's thesis. My goal which awaited her approval was to work toward a phenomenological description of her life with a view to achieving a situated understanding of the constraints facing women in South Asia, and how they chose to deal with them. Tanveer's response was immediate and favourable to the extent that she generously offered accommodation in her home for the duration of the proposed projects. Once in the field, the details of our work involved a degree of challenge. While apparently flattered by my interest in her life and work, Tanveer politely questioned my reasons for identifying her as a subject of study. My overlapping roles as monitor and graduate student also created an ambiguous mood that required continuous efforts to differentiate these functions.

I had heard of Tanveer as a woman who was highly respected as a community activist and who was remarkably effective in her work which took her to remote areas of the country where she (and a staff of three men) provided training in *capacity building* to selected community leaders - both women and men. Having entered the NGO community two years previously from a broad background of research, teaching and academia, Tanveer had been identified as an appropriate coordinator for a fledgling program. This development was taking place in an organization whose original mandate had aimed to fund small, community-based projects through partnerships with Canadian NGOs. After one year, however, an expanded plan for grassroots empowerment training was envisioned that would render marginalized communities more capable of their own organization and development, and that encouraged less dependence on the conventional paradigm of social welfare. Embedded in this new program's focus was a familiar, somewhat convoluted, vocabulary of development terms including *resource development*,

conscientization, and participatory democracy which attempted to describe the challenging task of enablement and confidence-building among the country's most disadvantaged populations. Engaged by the organization to operationalize such terms, Tanveer had rejected earlier planning efforts, and proceeded to design and monitor a wide-reaching action plan with a focus on participation. Within her design was a system of identifying grassroots leaders in communities throughout the country who were to convene regularly for a series of scheduled workshops over a one year period. Tanveer and her staff, with the occasional guest speaker, would lead these sessions that took place in the regions of the target communities. Both women and men participated (sometimes in segregated groups where custom required), and men were actively encouraged to cooperate with women. Included in the training agenda were conceptual processes relating to organization, planning, project design and problem-solving in addition to the more concrete skills of book-keeping, proposal writing, and group facilitation. On completion of the first round of workshops, graduates revealed a degree of enthusiasm and confidence that far exceeded staff expectations, and other organizations were showing interest in the program's methods. Tanveer's authority in the project included the design, implementation and follow-up of the resource development program in addition to the supervision of staff. Within the larger organization, she and the supervisors of two other divisions reported to the director.

What appeared significant about Tanveer's life and work was the mobility that she had achieved within a relatively short period of time and in the face of considerable obstacles. What surfaced as a theme in the time spent with her was a glimpse of gendered mobility patterns which did not categorically reject tradition. Much of her public image reflected layers of historical, social, and cultural meaning. Her more private, subjective 'self' revealed experiences that had inspired ambition and a vision of social change that would shift the dependence model of development to one of participatory, community-driven transformation. The relevance of mobility in Tanveer's life surfaced as she spoke of the obstacles

encountered as a Muslim woman in South Asia¹ and one born into a lower middle class urban community - constraints which she had cautiously and relentlessly sought to overcome. The ethnographic description in this paper reflects a particular view of Tanveer's experience that focuses largely on her accomplishments and which, therefore, does not adequately relate the scope of ambiguities and complexities observed in the field. As the author of this work, it is I who have chosen the particulars relating to gendered mobility, and have thereby mediated their significance. Consequently, the text that has emerged from our work together is contextualized in a specific relationship of differing, situated motives.

In cautious acknowledgement of the view that subjective accounts tend to reject the imposition of external constructs (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985:13), this thesis has two central objectives. One is to provide a phenomenological account of Tanveer's life as it was related by her, with contributions from some friends and colleagues, and as fragments of it were observed. The other is to discuss the aspects of Tanveer's 'story' that relate to gendered mobility and in so doing, demonstrate the merit of this concept as a thematic approach to gendered research. This focus allows for only perfunctory mention of important aspects of the ethnography and discussion, with a view to elaboration in future works.

Preceding the ethnographic account that follows, a brief description of the life history and participant observation methods used for this research in addition to an abbreviated description of the issues facing women in South Asia offers a context which responds to Marcus' warning that interpretive anthropology's general avoidance of the integral part of the "larger system" in "closely observed cultural worlds" can lead to problems with representation (1986:166). A discussion concludes the paper in an attempt to decipher some of the roles and tools that have provided Tanveer with a degree of mobility and flexibility not usually adopted by women in her culture.

¹ The disadvantaged position and disenfranchisement of women in South Asia are documented in extensive detail by women of many cultures in these countries whose experiences and interpretations often vary significantly from each other, and even more so from those of Western feminists and academics.

The production of knowledge by and about "Third World"² women warrants prominent mention. Current debates in the literature emerging from many sources reject essentialist approaches that "freeze third world women in time, space and history" (Mohanty 1991:6) and which do not account for the interrelated, layered aspects of class, race, power and nation required to accurately "position" women (ibid.:13). The challenges facing women in the current "gendered bureaucratic mire" (Staudt 1990: 304) of international development remain surprisingly similar to those described two decades ago. Consistently misrepresented as belonging to a monolithic throng, the individual woman is often assumed to have:

...a truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being "Third World" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized)...with Western feminists representing themselves in comparison as educated, modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions (Mohanty quoted in Behar 1990:281).

To situate this paper in a feminist anthropological perspective that challenges such stereotypes and addresses the real concerns of Third World women, Caplan's analysis provides a theoretical point of departure. As many researchers have emphasized, "the personal is the political", and in focusing on the strength of women as actors, anthropology is in a position to include the "very real constraints of their lives" by ignoring the traditional theoretical split between epistemology and politics (Caplan 1988a:12).

The central questions emerging from Tanveer's story relate to the impact of the "broader systems that structure and constrain everyday life" (Bourque & Warren 1985:1). One approach in examining such systems is to view the ways in which women live within and manoeuvre around imposed limitations relating to gender, class and race, not as voiceless 'victims', but as dynamic social agents. Young describes anthropologists as having been traditionally persuaded of women's "structural mutedness" - a

² Using Mohanty's definition of the '*Third World*', reference is made to "the colonized, neocolonized or decolonized countries (of Asia, Africa and Latin America) whose economic and political structures have been deformed", and to indigenous and other people of diverse ethnic origin residing in Western countries (1991:ix).

misconception that, when combined with a general ambivalence toward the life history method, has resulted in a focus away from the recognition of women's experience (1983:478). How this one woman has framed herself within the systems of her constraining society, and the extent to which she has made herself mobile, refocuses on experience and identifies a personal vision that is being effectively realized in the face of considerable restrictions.³ The following ethnography and discussion cannot avoid a somewhat poetic view of this individual woman - a view that nevertheless provides specific insight into the gendered experience of mobility. This life in progress shows how individuals can, "in the process of changing their lives for themselves, also alter the environment for others and thus act as significant agents of social change" (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985:204).

Context

Acknowledging the impossibility of identifying any 'general' context for women in South Asia, a brief description of the general constraints faced by diverse groups of women in the subcontinent, and specifically by Muslim women, introduces the grounding of this ethnographic work and its theme of gendered mobility. The recent literature about Muslim women in South Asia (which emerges in large part from Pakistan) provides a broad framework of the varied experiences of women in these cultures separated by political boundaries.

The five countries of the geographic region of South Asia - Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka - comprise a multitude of cultures with disparate histories, languages, and religions. Islamic communities are located in very small numbers in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Once a part of India, Pakistan was initially a sovereign state covering two distinct and separate geographic regions, born of partition in

³ Given that the contexts of women vary significantly across cultural and geographic lines, this work addresses aspects of gendered roles in the subcontinent and is therefore grounded for the most part in the analysis and writings of South Asian women.

1947 to provide a distinct nation for Muslims. Once one of five provinces of Pakistan known as East Pakistan, Bangladesh emerged as an independent Asian republic in 1971 as a result of civil war. Islamic communities are widespread throughout the northern areas of the subcontinent as a majority in both Bangladesh and Pakistan, and as a minority population in India where the historical legacy of Hindu-Muslim conflict continues. While Muslims and Hindus have lived together in these regions for centuries and share a number of cultural similarities, socially they are more distinct (Mandelbaum 1988:77).

During its history in the subcontinent, Islam has encountered two major foreign influences in the form of Ancient Indian civilization and British imperialism - an intersection which has resulted in the domination of regional Muslim politics largely by a secular leadership (Puri 1988:3). Throughout South Asian Islamic communities, however, religious or Shariat law provides a prescriptive grounding that is interpreted by religious teachers who have traditionally wielded powerful authority over their constituencies. A significant change is noted in the program of 'Islamisation' in Pakistan introduced by the late President Zia-ul-Haq which offered a higher level of authority to the clergy.

The traditions and prescriptions of Islam have placed varying levels of constraints on the mobility of Muslim women, the most 'public' of which relate to the customs of *purdah*⁴ that prescribe segregation or the "demarcation of sexual space" (Weiss 1991:259). *Purdah* predates Islam and is not a practise that is integral to Islam (Shaheed 1991:144). Nevertheless, the concept of *purdah* influences Muslim women most visibly in their inability to participate in areas of the public sphere including the market place and educational institutions (ibid.:147-148). Although the scripture prescribes equality among followers of

⁴ As described by Shaheed, the principles of *purdah* define space for women as private and interior (though even within the domestic sphere the authority of male family members still supersedes that of women) and for men as public and exterior. This principle, however, does not dictate social organization only in terms of the manipulation of space. Dress codes for women are driven (or rationalized) by the concept of *purdah* as are the less visible restrictions on behaviour and the limited opportunities for education and work available to women. The space definitions of *purdah* are role-oriented and the principle is portable in the form of a veil (*duppatta*, *chador* or *burqa*) as well as in the expected complex of behaviours that are demanded of women, particularly in the presence of unrelated males (Shaheed 1990:24-25).

Islam, "hierarchy pervades gender as well as most social relations" (Mandelbaum 1988:12). The lower middle class stratum of urban Muslim communities is documented to be the most strict regarding the traditions of *purdah* (Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987:28). While divisions of caste are not generally accepted by Muslim societies, the principles of caste society among the older tradition of Hindus in South Asia have affected other groups, and the hierarchy in Muslim communities is drawn through lines of class (Papanek 1982:192). Women of the lower middle class are generally granted less freedom and mobility than those in the working class (who have to leave the home to work) and as compared to upper middle class women whose observance of *purdah* rules is more a matter of choice and prestige. In addition to the tendency of the lower classes to imitate practices observed by the privileged, the "lower middle class is most anxious to maintain *purdah* since it is often the only visible sign that differentiates them from the working class" (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987:28).

The ability to work and to do so for acknowledged wages has been a central issue for women in South Asia. Information about women in Islamic communities has been difficult to gather due to the traditional invisibility of women's work in the public sphere, and to restrictions imposed by male enumerators and interviewers whose access to women has been limited. Women's action groups throughout South Asia are attempting to gather more accurate information. In Pakistan, for example, inconsistent data have reported varying proportions of women to be "economically productive", with percentages ranging from 3% to 12% in the 1981 population census (Shaheed and Mumtaz 1990:23). In contrast, more recent research done by women has confirmed that almost all Pakistani women work, and they work an average of 14 to 16 hours per day (Shaheed 1990:33). Similarly, in rural India, the work contribution of women has been found to be significantly greater than that of men (Parajuli 1991:177).

Further analytical challenges lie in the limited 'data' produced by social scientists which tend to reduce the conditions of women's lives to externally defined, objective "indicators" that do not reveal meaning in the context of daily lives (Mohanty 1991:6). The subtleties of women's experiences, and the

ways in which they manage their mobility, are not accessible through such distorted statistics or reductive indices. As Ferguson notes, "women typically bring knowledge that is qualitative, relational, and contextual, not easily captured by numerical and instrumental practices" (1990:298). Continuous efforts are made by South Asian women to research central areas of concern which relate to the conditions of women - property rights, violence against women, access to fertility choices, inequities in the family and access to employment and education, to name only a few (Bardhan 1991:164). As is the case with economic development, women are impacted very differently than men and are increasingly affected by the rapidly changing processes of industrialization. Situated views of women's lives complement contemporary research by getting closer to the cultural phenomena that underlie the real constraints facing women who continue to be profoundly influenced by the weight of feudal, religious and foreign influences.

By the end of the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), a "sombre deterioration" was observed in the conditions of women in many countries, and redefinitions of oppression were emerging from the Third World (Caplan 1988a:12). Rooted in a vastly different history and culture than that of the so-called 'developed' countries, women's groups throughout the subcontinent have established divergent interpretations of feminism and gender relations. Not unlike women of colour in the West who encounter suspicions in their communities about feminism and its largely white, middle-class agenda with some bourgeois reformist elements, some Third World women are seeking to establish their own body of knowledge (Johnson-Odim 1991:324). Bardhan describes "class, patriarchy and caste, or ethnic hierarchy" as the central "interactive elements defining gender relations in South Asia" (1991:185). However, the perpetuation of "feudal patriarchal norms" are noted by some Indian feminists whose fight against these historical influences has, in many instances, been linked to these same ideologies and agendas (Mohanty 1991a:21). While collectives of South Asian women have been highly effective through social resistance during times of national crisis, many have tended to revert to a more passive role once the crisis has abated (Junaid 1991:36). Contemporary women's groups, however, are seen to be presenting the greatest challenge to the "established political, economic and cultural order" (Parajuli 1991:177). Careful

documentation and actions of committed groups of women residing largely in urban centres seek to correct the record of women's experience and change discriminating laws through both grassroots and middle-class actions.

In the views expressed by a number of social activists⁵, many mainstream women's groups in South Asia represent privileged, educated and professional women whose significant efforts, while acknowledged, are not seen to reflect a full understanding of the ethnic, cultural and economic diversity of women's issues in rural areas. Urban groups that do attempt to penetrate these areas are occasionally criticized by more radical organizations for their inability to adequately 'speak the language of the people'. Notwithstanding this disadvantage of privilege, these groups are respected for the important link that they provide in the form of research and policy work, and in persistent efforts to change discriminating legislation. Other women choose different methods to effect social change. The following attempt to describe one woman's alternative experience reveals some of the characteristics and paradoxes of gendered mobility in a particular case, framed within the Islamic context of South Asia.

Methods

If it were an ethnography with women at the centre, written for women by women (even if the women at the centre were mostly women from other cultures and the women it was written for were mostly Western women who wanted to understand what gender means, how it works, and how it produces women's situations -that still being the unequal structure of the world and the structure of anthropology) something important would have shifted (Abu-Lughod 1990:25).

Prior to my departure for the field, I chose to approach Tanveer's story through the use of the life history method complemented by participant observation. The desired result was not a comprehensive history, but rather a glimpse into the evolving career of a female community worker who was reportedly developing a reputation for her ability to reach village people in efforts to assist them in improving the

⁵ Individuals encountered during the research period.

vitality and general health of their communities. What emerged from fieldnotes, taped interviews and a wide scope of subjective impressions was a recurring theme that spoke of one woman's mobility in a society and culture whose prescribed roles place considerably more constraints on the movement of women relative to men.

Drawing on David Mandelbaum's view of the value of life history studies, the ways in which individuals adapt to society are more important "than how society copes with the stream of individuals" (1973:177). Focusing on the "dynamic and adaptive aspects of the life experience, with the relations between one stage of life and the next, with the cumulative patterns of personal conduct, with the relevance of personal experience to social institutions, and with the impact of personal choice on social change", Mandelbaum outlines a manageable framework in which the "dimensions, turnings and adaptations" of an individual can be identified from an endless choice of experiences" (ibid.). Important to the recording of life history, however, is the careful selection of material to be included in the final recording, and the way this is analyzed. The challenge lies in "how to abstract the general from the particular, how to illumine sic the particular from the perspective of the general?" (ibid.:205).

This research involved an iterative process of discovery and adaptation that required flexibility. While I had planned to tape interviews with Tanveer, she was clearly more comfortable with informal talks. Compared with the 'formal' sessions that I attempted to schedule at every earnest turn, spontaneous and participatory discussions amidst hectic daily schedules and late night conversations offered more authentic and relaxed observations from Tanveer⁶. Although we managed several hours of taped interviews, the first person narratives that I had envisioned comprising the bulk of the ethnographic text

⁶ Of interest in our discussions was Tanveer's apparent lack of overt interest in information about my life. While we seemed to establish a cautious, somewhat professional friendship in the field that later resulted in a sincere effort to remain in contact, Tanveer's perception seemed to be one that limited me to the one-sided role of researcher. This was in keeping with Cotterill's observation that researchers' contributions are often unwelcome and not considered as "part of the research contract" (1992:596).

are less numerous and are complemented instead by descriptions that have been filtered through my lens and constructed text. Behar advises that life history be treated as a story, and not simply reduced to information - the text being "not a person, but a version of the self constructed by a subject to present to the anthropologist" (1990:226-227). This glance, therefore, must be seen *a priori* as fragments of a story - wrought from fieldnotes and beset with ambiguity both in the field and throughout the process of its creation. As is the case for similar texts, it is a story constructed by an observer, an 'other' whose efforts to mediate observed phenomena have been met with difficulties familiar to anthropological attempts to report unfamiliar experience. The resulting story centres around those significant events or influences which Tanveer chose to identify as central to her tale, in addition to selected moments witnessed in the field that are relevant to the theme of gendered mobility.

Without prompting, Tanveer identified events and people in her life that can be interpreted in Mandelbaum's terms as "turnings" and influences that wielded significant impact on her decisions and on the flow of her personal and professional experiences. As one of several contributors to this research process, Tanveer independently chose to organize interviews between myself and a number of her friends and colleagues in order that their perceptions of her could become a part of the text. In this situation and others, the conventional notions of the balance of power in interviews were challenged (Cotterill 1992:599). Rather than a fixed balance with the researcher in control, Tanveer ensured an active part in the arrangement of the time and place of our interviews, in the degree of her participation, and by involving other participants. In further consideration of this interactive relationship between authors⁷, the text was reviewed and the direct quotes modestly edited by Tanveer prior to final submission. In response to my invitation for her to contribute to the completed text, she provided a preface after completing her review.

⁷ Myself as the author of this work, Tanveer as the author of her life.

The value of participation observation became obvious in the views of Tanveer's life, both personal and professional, that I was able to develop as we worked and lived together. Limitations encountered in the field were many, however, not the least of which was my dual presence as a graduate student and research monitor for the organization that employed Tanveer⁸. My glimpse of Tanveer's life was also compromised by the fact that I did not speak her language, and my research was made possible only by her fluency in English. Access to important conversations and poetry readings among Tanveer and her friends would naturally have offered a richer view of her experience.

'Public' accounts comprised much of what Tanveer discussed with me initially in consideration of what she seemed to construe as my expected areas of interest such as the institutionalized rhetoric of Women in Development (WID). More private issues of family and responsibility were raised as familiarity and a degree of trust evolved between us. Often, circumstances limited the time Tanveer and I could spend together. Events such as the periodic illness of her mother, a car accident involving close friends, and conflicts among friends, naturally distracted her from the time she was able to invest. Significant shifts in Tanveer's travelling schedules, and occasionally in her mood, rendered her inconsistently available. During her periodic absences, I moved from her welcoming household to that of other generous hosts. While these moves interrupted the process of the research, they offered relief from the intensity of our time together as well as an opportunity to view other lives in a different socio-economic context.

Although it was I who initiated the work that Tanveer and I accomplished, this research can be viewed as a collaborative and interactive work. My objectives involved the fulfilment of requirements for a graduate degree and the pursuit of a strong interest in how women choose to move in different realities.

⁸ A responsibility which occupied approximately one quarter of the work days spent in the field.

Tanveer's agreement to participate in this project, and the time she granted to the process resulted in an effort that involved considerable time and cooperation, and in the documentation of fragments of her story.

Visweswaran describes the texts of experimental ethnography as "marked by disaffections, ruptures and incomprehensions" (1988:30). In documenting what I perceived and what was offered to me in the form of information provided by Tanveer and others, the following ethnographic description is marked in this way and does not follow a linear or chronological course. Instead, I have chosen to create a text that wanders between thematic aspects of Tanveer's life, describing a complex of experiences overlaid with selected observations. Relevant ethnographic information beyond the context described above is required periodically to punctuate the tale. In order to minimize disruption of the description's flow, important points of ethnographic and reflexive context are located in substantial footnotes. In reference to Behar's recommendation (1990:26), the discussion attempts "to speak to the text and not past it" to avoid the dual risk of typification and the mistake of allowing the text to speak for itself. The discussion which concludes the paper outlines significant issues of gendered mobility relating to the ethnographic account.

A Case of Mobility

We walked into the building, Tanveer and I, surrounded by the small group of men who had accompanied us on our journey. We were women in the public domain of men, and we were there for different reasons: I to observe, and Tanveer to lend her unusual expertise and leadership to a group of male social activists whom she had come to know in training workshops over the preceding year. For the entirety of the five day journey that took us to a number of remote villages, we had been in similar circumstances - two women moving with relative ease among men and between the domains of men and

women, seemingly welcomed in both worlds and seemingly exempt as teachers or ‘experts’ from the routine standards of segregation. The mobility I was both witnessing and experiencing contrasted (at least superficially) with my limited knowledge of gender relations in Islamic communities⁹.

The air was charged with anticipation. The conference scheduled for the next day was to be the first of its kind with this group of graduates from a program designed to help empower and organize communities at the grassroots level. Upon our arrival, the cohort of strictly male participants milled about the corridors of the community hall amidst the rooms where they would be lodged on floor mats for the two nights away from their homes. When Tanveer and our familiar coterie of organizers were noticed, they stopped and expounded warm greetings. In little time, the news of our arrival had spread, and the men quickly gathered in one of the rooms, seating themselves cross-legged on the floor around Tanveer. Questions came from all corners concerning new developments planned for the future through the grassroots organization that had introduced her to their lives and communities.

Entering the room last, after several lengthy introductions in the hallway, I was struck by what I saw. This very relaxed, confident, unpretentious female activist whom I had come to know in the past weeks was surrounded by more than twenty men of all ages who were visibly impatient to hear her opinions on their work and the status of development efforts in the region. Although the formal session was not due to begin until the next day, and some were obviously exhausted from a day’s journey, there was little time to waste. The group would remain there until well after midnight, only to rise early the next morning to participate in the more structured information-sharing they had come to accomplish, to be facilitated by

⁹ Naturally, the presence of a foreigner can alter any situation to the extent that ‘normal’ customs are waived. On another occasion, in the company of a male friend in the city, we were unable to find a tomb about which he had chosen to write an article. After stopping for directions outside a railyard, he commented that we were offered more assistance than he would have received had he been on his own. While curiosity may offer a simple explanation for this unusual response, it was difficult for me to ascertain in my travels with Tanveer the degree to which our shared mobility was exaggerated on account of my foreign presence.

Tanveer and a male colleague. I was observing men¹⁰ from the rural areas of a region where culture and religious prescription did not allow for integrated workshops of men and women due to strict traditions regarding gender relations. These men were, however, colleagues of a woman who challenged these traditions expressly because of their exclusion of women, yet respected the time it would take to begin to include them. A visible bond of trust had been established between the participants of this session and Tanveer, along with the other facilitators in her organization. It was not an immediate trust that I was witnessing, but one which had grown gradually. As Tanveer put it on another occasion:

As we went into the field to identify potential partners and then built their capacity in organizational management and community development, the sustained rapport with them helped in evolving warm relationships with these communities.

My stay in my 'field' was almost over, and I had collected a considerable amount of information from this woman who had agreed to work with me. By living with Tanveer for many weeks, I had been privileged to learn about her family and about a life of intense responsibilities. On *charpoys*¹¹ pushed together to accommodate her room, with individual quilts wrapped around each in the remaining cold of winter, we had on occasion talked late into the night about the decisions and sacrifices she had made in an attempt to lead a respected and what she referred to as a "meaningful" life. We talked further in many settings - around the ironing table and amidst the deafening chaos of countless, spine rattling auto-rickshaw journeys. Through these conversations and observations in a variety of contexts, I had come to understand the high regard she commanded. Working alongside her colleagues, I had also been introduced to various aspects of Tanveer's work and life (the two never separated to any great degree among this group of community activists) as filtered through other eyes. I had been told by one friend who had known her well for years that she was a "different person" in the field where she "came alive",

¹⁰ These particular men had been selected a year earlier for their participation in the training workshops coordinated by Tanveer, chosen for their individual success as leaders within their communities. Thus, they might be viewed as men with an unusual degree of social awareness. An additional feature that by this time might have further differentiated them from other men in the area was the completion of a year's training and a degree of authentic "conscientization" (as Tanveer called it) evolving from these workshops.

¹¹ Beds constructed with woven rope stretched across a frame.

doing the work which she herself professed to do best. Nevertheless, I was unprepared for the striking, dynamic presence she projected in the field where her work to date was being formulated and played out, and where she had managed enough legitimate mobility to reach the most traditional and least accessible people within what she called her "constituency".

At this late juncture in my fieldwork, I found myself facing new questions that complemented the more confined ones I had prepared prior to my arrival. Why did these individuals allow Tanveer the respect and attention that men apparently denied women in general? What was it about Tanveer that they so obviously trusted and revered? How was it that Tanveer had been able to mobilize herself to this extent, amidst severe cultural constraints that were particularly relevant to her economic class and gender? How had she managed to reach these men who were culturally, geographically, and often linguistically removed from the realities of her life? What differentiated Tanveer from the women to whom she had introduced me at the mainstream women's action groups in the urban centres? Were there other such individuals breaking ground among men in Muslim communities of the rural areas? Vague, unformed answers to some of these questions would appear in the course of the time that remained. Other insights arose from a review of research materials many months after my return from the field.

Laughter and conversation among the group continued late into the night with introductions requested on my behalf from each participant, patiently translated by the colleague with whom we were travelling. Each spoke thoughtfully about his work and about this woman/teacher who had changed his view of the possibilities for the future of his community. The translator smiled to himself in anticipation of a debate after the expression of one participant's words chosen to describe Tanveer: "He says this is not a lady. She is a man...that is the real characteristics of a man. It means she is very brave". Here, Tanveer found a hook to begin, once again, her education of men whom she encountered daily in her life as a community worker. As an aside to me in English, she commented:

That is the conditioned behaviour; by identifying a woman with manly characteristics, they reassure themselves that bravery, in fact, is the sole prerogative of men.

In an impassioned voice, she launched into one of many personal stories which she habitually shared with the people whom she is trying to convince of a different view of men and women, stratified traditionally and rigidly along class and gender lines in Islamic communities. As she explained later, to describe the essence of the problem, she chose to reach into her past, remembering a painful time when her father was dying. Tanveer, as the virtual head of her family, had negotiated with doctors and took control of his care until the point of his death. Her complete involvement was unchallenged in a home where the mother was neither in good health nor was she accustomed to moving in the public domain; where the eldest son had chosen to make a better living by leaving the country; and where the only other son had died in a tragic traffic accident many years earlier. Her father, she explained to these men in a voice that bespoke her emotion, had made the same mistake of representation in the expression of his appreciation: "You are just like a son". She insisted to the men present that women must be respected for the work they do and the responsibilities they take on as women without simplistically rationalizing these strong behaviours as 'male'.

The message seemed to have an effect. Another participant gave a poetic description of Tanveer as a model which he felt his daughters and sisters should follow. Yet another referred to her using a respectful term for grandmother¹². Further debate was sparked by a question that presumed a higher

¹² Within the Muslim family, women are granted increasing amounts of respect in accordance with the number of sons produced. Female status also improves with age. Outside the family, traditional gender relations are generally governed by the rules of *purdah* whereby two overarching principles of gender segregation and female seclusion are observed (Shaheed 1990:24).

An interesting encounter with an elderly male development worker revealed another gendered experience relating to age. This was a man who had given a great deal of thought to the limitations of gendered experience in his country. Shortly after we met he asked me "Do I remind you of your grandfather?" Chuckling to himself, he continued on to poetically describe how he had, over the years, managed to 'change' his gendered perspective to that of a "grandmother".

degree of privilege for a woman 'from the city', and again Tanveer met the challenge with detailed biographical information that spoke of her struggles to move beyond the very real and rigid restrictions of her urban class which were not obvious to people from the rural areas.

On the previous day, in another village, Tanveer and I had been invited to the men's meeting place of a family-run non-government organization. We sat on the grass of a generous garden surrounded by brilliant flowers in bloom, with a warm wind blowing and a herd of water buffalo wandering past. Signs of a flood that had devastated this part of the country less than six months before were still apparent, yet the beauty and calm of the early evening masked this devastating chapter of local history. The group of men in this setting were somewhat more distant and older than the group we were to meet the next day. The head of the community organization, at age 75, claimed to have learned from Tanveer about the injustices toward women in his culture. As we sat, he self-consciously demonstrated his evolving views by inviting an older female neighbour to join us. She did so reluctantly, shyly shielding her face with her *chador*, and sitting at an angle that concealed her face from the eight or so men present.

From this public place, we had been accompanied to the family house where the women resided, our male companions falling away to wait elsewhere. We were greeted with enthusiasm by numerous women as they flowed out of the family courtyard to receive us, a mass of colour and smiles and welcome. This family had hosted Tanveer the year before during a training workshop and had come to see her as an important person in their lives. They insisted that we take tea with them¹³ and the mother who headed the household talked quietly with Tanveer while at least fifteen other women and as many children looked on as we sat in the courtyard with domestic animals scurrying between our feet. Our immediate transfer on this day from the separate, public, male sphere to the female, domestic domain was a dizzying

¹³ The hospitality extended to us wherever we travelled was always immediate and generous. On two occasions, travelling in disparate regions during *Ramazan* (the month of fasting), complete meals were arranged for me which were not shared by our Muslim hosts.

experience for one whose practical understanding of *purdah* was just beginning to take shape¹⁴. The spaces were concretely defined. The only person who accompanied us between the segregated areas was a teenage son who, as a related male, moved freely between both worlds. In these brief glimpses of each, my sense of the men's area was that of open space, relaxation and movement, while that of the women was enclosed, crowded and dynamic.

During the spring festival of *basant*, we attended a demonstration that commemorated a historical women's protest rally. Consequent to the original event, many female protestors had been imprisoned for their actions. Tanveer and I arrived late at the site of the march, having miscalculated the location, but in time to see some participants chanting slogans, surrounded by a small crowd consisting of a familiar core of female participants whom I had seen at other gatherings and a small representation of male activists and journalists. After the event, we were invited to the home of some old friends of Tanveer's whose rooftop was hosting a *basant* party which witnessed the competitive flying of thousands of kites above the city. Winding our way on foot through narrow alleys and up a dark stairway to the concrete terrace, we watched the familiar display of kite theatrics that had been gaining momentum for weeks. I took the opportunity to talk with an actress who was involved in a street theatre group that directed productions to those populations who had limited access to social and political information. Had I been more observant, I would have noticed that aside from this woman, Tanveer and myself, there were only men present. Within minutes of our arrival, Tanveer was agitatedly declaring that she wished to go. The five or so members of our party obliged, unsure of the reason for our swift departure. The reason later became evident when Tanveer allowed herself to break down. The disappointment, she explained, of a household of presumably progressive males who would insist on the segregation of 'their' women, obliged

¹⁴ The subtleties of *purdah*, a concept that risks simplification through Western eyes, involved my constant attention in the field. As a culture-based principle, there were many examples of how this concept served to organize the roles of both men and women with a direct influence on mobility at all levels. The principles of *purdah* are interpreted and followed in significantly different ways and degrees throughout the northern regions of the subcontinent.

to remained below in the kitchen while the men celebrated on the roof, had been a shock. At the time, this example of insensitivity struck me as a mild offence relative to the existing examples of blatant discrimination against women. To Tanveer, however, it was a reminder of what she frequently saw as the constant hypocrisy of some men who called themselves progressive and thereby boasted a superior level of social consciousness. It was the only time I saw her cry.

Born to a lower middle class family¹⁵ in an urban centre, life until age 14 for Tanveer was not difficult. With many siblings of each gender preceding her, she had yet to experience the weight of a younger sister who would be born a year later and for whom, due to circumstance, Tanveer would eventually take almost full responsibility. The hard work of her life had not yet started, and a series of "turnings" that would guide many of her life and career decisions awaited her. The first of these events Tanveer described as the dramatic point at which she was introduced to an injustice imposed by her gender and by a host of historical, cultural and political factors - and an experience that would be internalized to define the evolution of her life's work in community activism. The event occurred at the age of 14 when a boy in her neighbourhood sent a child-like letter of devotion to Tanveer. The letter, found by a male family member, resulted in the severe beating of Tanveer who was unilaterally blamed for having threatened the honour of her family¹⁶. She described this traumatic injustice as a "blessing in

¹⁵ An urban class identified by Tanveer and within the literature as one which has historically placed significantly more restrictions on women than other classes.

¹⁶ Strong notions of honour govern gender relations and other aspects of social organization in Muslim societies (Shaheed 1990:23; Mandelbaum 1988:20). The burden of honour (*izzat*) carried by women is a heavy one. Neelam Hussain (1993:4) writes:

You have decided that your honour resides in my body. It is a clever trick for it leaves you free to make or break the rules as you go along, while I am hidden behind the walls of your home and shrouded in the chadar' which stifles me. . .It is a wonderful invention, this honour of yours that finds its vindication in my dishonour.

Family honour depends upon the ability of male members to provide for the family and to ensure that female members are mindful of a rigid code of conduct. 'Crimes of honour' including even the suspicion of indecent behaviour, can bring disastrous consequences. It is the responsibility of men to control female activities, and marriages are often arranged shortly after puberty. In the patriarchal structure of the family, the eldest male

disguise", as it was this incident that shaped an immediate, though unformed goal to work toward the elimination of ignorance that produced such violence against women. In her description of the way that she had come to define the problem for her students, Tanveer shared her thoughts on a central issue of gender dynamics in a strongly male-dominated society:

Patriarchy entails a strange duality of norms and values. If I do something wrong, that is an impeachment of my father's or my brother's honour. However, the misdeeds of my father or brother would not be considered any business of mine.

Tanveer proceeded to plan her future with a primary focus on education. Until she reached grade eight, this was met with little resistance. However, at the suggestion of continuing on to college, the family, and her father in particular, objected in part because of the family's financial constraints. Tanveer assured him that she would support herself and staged a hunger strike at the age of 16 until she was granted permission to attend college. Her effectiveness as an activist had begun. After completing a course of study which prepared her for medical school, she was ready to follow a career path that would guarantee her mobility and financial security. However, the death of one of her brothers altered this plan and marked another unhappy turning for Tanveer:

I had been at medical college for some five months when my brother met with the road accident and succumbed to his injuries after a week or so. That was a traumatic experience for me. I realized that I had lost my faith in the medical profession. I just went through the theory examination and refused to take the practical part of the examination. Once admitted to the humanities, I took philosophy and literature for the graduation, and secured maximum marks in philosophy.

As important figures and allies to many women in South Asia, brothers often act as benefactors (Mandelbaum 1988:46). By the time of her brother's death, Tanveer's eldest brother had left the country with his wife and children to earn a better living. A sister was also to leave with her family for the same

holds the greatest responsibility as the head of the household, and unmarried women or girls traditionally have the least authority (Shaheed 1990:23). The concept of honour seriously restricts female mobility through the arrangement of early marriages and through the negative value attached to women's work, particularly in the urban lower middle class and in rural landholding families (Shaheed & Mumtaz 1990:15-17). Furthermore, *izzat* requires constant reaffirmation and is strengthened by (and in turn strengthens) the practices of *purdah* (Mandelbaum 1988:23-24).

reason¹⁷. Tanveer's responsibilities mounted critically as a result of the departure of these important allies, and with the slowly fading health of both parents, she became the principal guardian of her youngest sister.

Funding her education by tutoring other students, Tanveer pursued a master's degree in philosophy and gained a reputation for having achieved the highest marks in the department's history. Despite the constraints typical to her community, she had accomplished an optimal education and was ready to work for a living.¹⁸

When I told my mother that I had got a job, she refused to allow it. She said, "Look here! That's against our traditions. No girl is supposed to work outside her home. You can do so over my dead body." I said, "Mama, I have to fulfil my promise to myself. I didn't achieve all this education for nothing. You better change your way of thinking." After a protracted debate and bitter altercations, I got that job.

This employment experience was a disappointment, however, due to a hostile work environment, and Tanveer decided to return to a familiar group where she worked as a researcher and office administrator for a short period of time. Her ambition to teach soon prompted her to apply for a lecturer's position, but she was turned down several times as a result of the local university's conservative hiring policy. As an alternative, she went on to teach for two years at a grammar school after which she was offered a research position with a prominent women's organization. After eighteen months with this group, she and a number of colleagues applied for a scholarship to a foreign university which Tanveer managed to win with her excellent credentials. This graduate training was to take her away from her family responsibilities and friends for a period of three years. However, the prospect of this absence in the face of looming problems proved to be impossible. While in transit to her new academic challenge she learned from a

¹⁷ Many families that I encountered in South Asia had lost at least one member to higher incomes and greater opportunities in the Middle East, Britain or North America.

¹⁸ Because Tanveer was raised in a family that was bound to the traditions of a lower urban class, her decisions and activities constantly challenged the strict customs of her community. Despite this interface, Tanveer had managed her life carefully to the extent that she remained highly respected within the community as a 'pillar' to whom anyone could go for help.

friend by telephone that her mother was unwell. Without hesitation, Tanveer returned home, having never reached her destination.

Tanveer's mother, whom I was told I should address as *Kha'ala* (a respectful term comparable to 'auntie'), was in mourning for her husband when she welcomed me into her household. Several weeks remained in the period of time religious custom demanded of a woman who remained at home for four months and ten days after the death of her husband. Until the end of this mourning period, she would not even allow herself to leave the home to seek medical attention. While other female family members are not affected by these rules, the widow remains at home, avoiding any interaction with unrelated males. As a devout woman in her fifties, and in poor health, *Kha'ala* was not stable on her feet and rested for much of the day on a bed in a room that was separated from the formal front room by a closed curtain. Always by her side was a metal box containing all the ingredients for *pan* - leaves, herbal paste, ground nuts and cardamom - which she would chew slowly throughout the day. Attending to some of her needs when her daughters were absent was a thirteen year old cousin who had come to live in the house after her husband's death¹⁹. More distant family members would occasionally visit, talking quietly with her as their children played, and as unrelated male visitors were greeted in a room apart.

Kha'ala was a paradoxically warm yet stern woman who often managed a smile despite her poor health and the worries that she carried for her two remaining unmarried daughters whose disparity in age and experience had resulted in strong differences in personality and direction. For the duration of my visit, she appeared to accept me, in her words, as a daughter, and made frequent efforts to converse with me in sign language that was regular cause for mutual laughter. But *Kha'ala's* concern for Tanveer and

¹⁹ According to Tanveer, it had not been acceptable that there was no male member living in the household after the death of her father. A solution to this problem was found in this cheerful thirteen year old who did not attend school and was therefore available to assist Tanveer's mother throughout the day. Being from a poorer family, this boy was afforded a better lifestyle than what he had before. He made frequent visits to his family home during my stay and seemed not to be compromised by his recent new role in a different household.

her younger sister often created tension in the household. Tanveer's career as an employed, independent, and headstrong woman defied the traditions of her family, community and class. It was unusual that she still remained single although the dilemmas created by family events had imposed a role that encouraged her reluctance to divert her attention from her family responsibilities before she had assured herself of the best upbringing for her sister. The decisions made in this regard, she admitted, had taken their toll. While many compromises had been reached, debates with her mother were stressful on both sides. Tanveer was tired and discouraged, but clearly not regretful of her choice to care for her family first. She had strong values surrounding this commitment and she sought to transfer these principles not only to her young sister, but to the children of her older sister, whose regular visits to the house with their mother punctuated my temporary membership in the household. Refusing from an early age to wear make-up or jewellery (both symbols of privileged classes), Tanveer wished to maintain an exemplary appearance that was unadorned, but always immaculate, with careful attention given to the cloths she bought to have made into *shalwar kameez*²⁰ for her and her sister. She explained:

At an early stage, I reached the conclusion that beauty was a gifted quality and no amount of make-up could change the person altogether. However, the development of one's personality was a matter of conscious decision and I opted for that. I don't bother if my clothes or make-up are appreciated or not. These are the things that everyone can do. I opted for an intellectually conscious way of life and my gratification came with this sense of different priorities.

In contrast, Tanveer's sister Saeeda²¹, at age 15, was enthusiastic about cosmetics (although she wore little make-up) and jewellery, and had already made it clear to Tanveer that she would not be following her example. Having witnessed the sacrifices made, the troubled times and the fragile health of this sister, she

²⁰ The *shalwar kameez*, consists of a long tunic and baggy pants and is commonly worn with a *duppatta* or *chador* that traditionally covers the head, shoulders and chest. In urban settings the *duppatta*, ranging in width from a thin slip of fabric to a wide piece of cloth, is often draped loosely around the neck, with the two ends trailing behind, now more of a symbol of the traditional head-covering required of women once used as a guard against the sun, and later as a means to mask the contours of the body and a sign of servility. In contrast, women observing more traditional ways, and especially those in rural settings, are rarely seen without their upper bodies draped in a larger *chador* or a full length *burqa* (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987: 77-78).

²¹ A pseudonym.

had expressed no desire to partake in such a difficult life. Choosing between the models of her more traditional sisters and that of Tanveer, Saeeda was decidedly in favour of the former. Tanveer's response to this decision was one of respect and compassion to the extent that she had resolved to arrange a marriage for her sister should this be requested. A lighthearted teenager, Saeeda would combine her central participation in household chores with loud laughter or as she and her family watched television and spoke of the day's events. She also found great cause for mirth in the antics of this foreigner living among them, peering curiously around corners to see how I managed my laundry, watching as I self-consciously ate my dinner or folded my clothes. "May I call you *baji*²²?" she asked one day as I struggled with the ironing table.

"This is my Brother" - Tanveer casually announced as she introduced me to Akmal²³ in the front room not long after my arrival. I was confused, having thought I had grasped the family's structure in the understanding that her only living brother was out of the country. Subsequent to this meeting, we spent a considerable amount of time with Akmal and I became further perplexed by his relationship to Tanveer. He was visibly devoted to her, anxious to assist her in any way possible, and impatiently awaited her arrival home from work on most days. Sharing her vocation in community development, Akmal was the coordinator of a literacy project, a position which he had pursued under Tanveer's watchful guidance. They would talk for hours in the front room of the house, discussing decisions, sharing ideas and experiences, giving mutual advice. Rounds of teasing occupied much of their conversation in my presence, and emotion ran high when Akmal considered himself harshly judged or ignored by Tanveer who, for several years, had occupied the position of mentor in his life.

²² A kinship term meaning older sister. I took this request as a sign of welcome into the family and was interested to note that Saeeda actually never used this term when addressing me, despite my invitation for her to do so.

²³ A pseudonym.

As my understanding of the culture and my familiarity with the personalities grew, certain aspects of the relationship became clearer and were finally confirmed by Tanveer. "No, he is not my real brother", she replied when I eventually queried the nature of their visible bond. She went on to explain. Several years before, Tanveer had helped Akmal, who was then her student, through a crisis in his personal and professional life by providing counsel - a service of friendship that she tirelessly provided to innumerable friends and acquaintances despite her heavy family and work-related responsibilities. In time, they declared a fictive kin relationship, subsequently addressing each other by kin terms, *bhai* (younger brother) and *baji* (older sister)²⁴. However, in taking on a new sibling, one inherits "a vast array of relationships in the bargain" (Kumar 1992:175). It was to be a bond fused by kinship-like ties and responsibilities, and the protective brotherly attitude of Akmal toward Tanveer was passionately demonstrated in a number of situations where he feared for her safety or health, or when he felt that her honour was threatened. His role as a brother was concretized in this behaviour and was, in various ways, reciprocated by Tanveer who frequently, though affectionately, complained of his intense, unrelenting attention. However, in defense of his protective and sometimes stifling conduct, she was compassionate: "...he always do this [kind of behaviour] and one can give liberty that since he is a brother, there is no harm in it." What the relationship offered Tanveer was an active source of support unknown to her in recent years with one brother permanently absent and the other tragically lost. As the self-identified head of her household and major bread-winner, she had carried a lot of the weight of the family which she continued to do, but more recently under the watchful eye of this new 'sibling'. One or two other friendships with her male peers also seemed to reflect a similar type of bond, though without the same intensity. With one of these, a long term rift in the friendship was being resolved as my visit drew to an end, and references to him also

²⁴ What I was witnessing was not unusual among relationships within defined communities of the subcontinent. Mandelbaum (1988:6) describes the common usage of kinship terms among "villagers" of these regions through "fictive extension". I had encountered a different version of this type of relationship in another household where I was introduced to a couple referred to as "cousins". In this instance my host later explained that the two individuals were probably not kin, but that this label legitimized the company of unrelated, unmarried men and women in a public place. Fictive siblings and cousins thereby moved more freely together under the watchful eye of the community.

as 'brother' resurfaced as they reconciled their differences. In addition to the consistent support and affection granted by these neutral bonds, it seemed that such socially legitimized fictive kin relationships allowed Tanveer more mobility in the public sphere of her daily life where it was generally less acceptable to travel as a woman alone²⁵. In fact, Tanveer rarely spent time on her own. Among Tanveer's large core of friends and family, I was also beginning to notice a culturally specific view of companionship, space and privacy that differed from my experience²⁶.

Beyond the boundaries of her family, Tanveer's career as a community worker had taken shape during the two years preceding my research. This was also a period when the growing 'professionalization' of development workers in the country was seen by some as a negative and elitist consequence of Western, post-colonial, and entrepreneurial influences. Consequently, Tanveer and her colleagues were struggling to maintain integrity amidst an increasingly competitive field that guaranteed, for some ambitious individuals, unprecedented salaries from foreign funding sources which threatened the efforts of smaller organizations. Tanveer had become a leader in her field without such compromises, and was becoming increasingly known for her commitment and skill. Notwithstanding her reputation, one colleague described his surprise when first introduced to Tanveer who did not fit his preconceived, elevated "image"

²⁵ Tanveer travelled independently to work and to various other places by rickshaw. While she did not seem in the least afraid of these journeys, it was clear that company was preferred when in public and I rarely saw her in such a setting without the company of at least one or two male friends. From a societal point of view, it was clear to me from my own experience that women were neither welcomed nor comfortable when in the public sector of this particular community. A short trip to the bank in the middle of the day demonstrated to me the virtual absence of women in this sphere. Exceptions included the paradoxical presence of a few lavishly groomed women employed as receptionists by the more distinguished banks, and the occasional woman from the lowest classes whose social 'invisibility' did not insist on head covering.

²⁶ Tanveer's household regularly received visitors who would stay over night. On one occasion, after calculating a larger number than usual, I suggested that I move upstairs to a small room, rarely used, which sat apart from the main part of the house. My suggestion was greeted by an awkward silence from Tanveer which I interpreted as concern for my sense of safety. I learned that this was not the case when she asked me in an incredulous tone "Do you want to be alone?". It occurred to me only then how few moments I had spent alone since my arrival. Living alone, wanting to be alone, seeking time for solitude, and privacy other than for the most personal of daily routines, were notions unfamiliar to my hosts.

of the name that preceded her. Because of this more subtle presentation or image, unlike many mainstream members from central organizations, she was able to reach women at the most extreme ends of the social and cultural spectrum. She travelled easily between the urban groups and among the ethnic diversity of the rural villages where, in Tanveer's words and in the vernacular of community development, the "poorest of the poor" resided. Her abilities inspired respect²⁷, inspiration and, in some cases, incredulity among her male colleagues, one of whom described his impressions in detail:

Thanks to her background, she can speak the language, whereas the rest of the women of her age or senior to her, they have this inborn problem - of class. They come from a different class, and they just cannot speak peoples' languages. Most of the women who are into this kind of a business, even in the NGO field and in other activism, unfortunately most of them do not speak our language. Tanveer has that. She speaks peoples' language so she has that advantage. And as I said earlier, she has gone through hell - she has gone through strange experiences of her life. Coming from that background, she has observed very very painful incidents, personal and with the society around. Therefore she has that kind of fire and urge to move things.

For women, the enigma of this unusual personality seemed ambiguous. A close friend and colleague noted that other women felt "overshadowed and were sometimes sarcastic and derogatory", and that his wife had noticed that Tanveer was generally more comfortable in the company of men within their large group of intellectual, socially and politically active friends. Early in our conversations, Tanveer impressed upon me that she did not identify with "Western" definitions of feminism although these interpretations were well integrated into some of the mainstream women's groups whose priorities addressed the importance of legislative change and human rights issues relating to women. In general, as Tanveer repeatedly pointed out, Western concepts could not be readily translated into the life of her communities where the media-driven images of Western women create confusion and ambivalence. Although Tanveer had worked among these women's action groups for a number of years (though never with the sense of belonging and commitment she had recently found in her activities at the grassroots level), her experiences

²⁷ One colleague commented that a sign of the respect afforded to Tanveer was the way in which her male and female colleagues naturally addressed her as *aap* and not *tum*, the former being a more formal sign of respect (comparable to the French *vous* and *tu*).

in the rural areas revealed that the needs of women in the villages were of a different nature²⁸. The relevance of the impact of stereotypic Western images became clearer in Tanveer's description of how women chose to model themselves after her "character":

Another important thing is this; when you have an enhanced social role, people begin to take minor attributes of your person as positive qualities and follow you. If I adopted the image of a Western woman, the prototype could have isolated me from the social reality of the women with whom I was working.

In her society, she insisted, there was little to be gained from attempting to immediately alleviate the tensions and inequity of gender segregation, given the cultural and social constructions that were deeply embedded in traditional communities. Significant separation in the form of *purdah* and other customs reduced, to varying degrees, women's mobility and opportunity. Far from being a simple issue of gender discrimination, the problem involved a complex of factors typical to other 'developing' countries which related to the immobility imposed by entrenched class hierarchies, feudal control, and an exacting global economy²⁹. To effect change, Tanveer explained, one must gain access to women (and thereby to the community as a whole) through the male members of a community, a task which frequently proved challenging. Without the most basic understanding and cooperation of men, women simply could not be reached. Both men and women thereby constituted the dual and equal focus of her efforts: men as the 'gatekeepers' who permitted access to the women, and women as potentially powerful activists at the community level.

²⁸ Historical influences including colonial rules in addition to the daily intervention of the *maulvies* (religious teachers) had resulted in a legacy of dependence among the diverse populations in this region of South Asia. The people lacked even the most basic experience in organizing their own communities. Rural women were suffering from problems additional to those relating to literacy and discriminating legislation, and faced extreme poverty, economic exploitation and disease made worse by lack of sanitation. Tanveer's focus aimed to teach planning strategies and problem-solving skills in an effort to avoid the perpetuation of dependence on welfare or charity.

²⁹ Of particular concern is "the way that market economies have shaped an international order in which developing countries are sources of cheap labour and raw materials for technologically sophisticated countries where capital is accumulated" (Bourque and Warren 1991:288).

Among her colleagues, Tanveer was not identified as a "feminist" - an ambiguous descriptor in many areas of the subcontinent due to its Western associations. However, her work was considered to be of utmost importance to issues relating to gender relations and the enablement of erstwhile disempowered and dependent communities. In one instance, Tanveer was portrayed by a male colleague as:

...a very very sensitive woman of this society. And thank God she adopted this - she took this role that she would educate other women and these kinds of things. . . . However, in the [local] perspective I wouldn't rate Tanveer a typical feminist kind of a person. You know in the [national] perspective we have feminists who would simply go, even a couple of years back, would simply go to the level of "slaughter all men" kind of a feeling. She was never that kind.

In Tanveer's view, the role of a female activist was clear:

A female activist has to work on two levels. One is to build the awareness of rights among women; my understanding is that no more than 10% of women have a basic idea of their rights. Then comes the role of an advocate with policy-making and legislative bodies.

As we entered the desert village (a community never before visited by Tanveer, but one which knew of her work), a flood of women greeted us. From the very old who touched our heads to the young who vigorously hugged Tanveer and extended warm handshakes to me, there seemed to be close to fifty women who had come out with their children in the intense midday heat to wish us welcome. Quickly ushered into an area protected from the sun by an overhang, we sat with these women who were invited to share their experiences. The mood was cheerful and alive with laughter and opinions, yet there was an intensity of purpose that belied a more serious agenda. Their discussion (translated by Tanveer) was about the transformation taking place in their community relating to the participation of their community's leaders in training workshops; the organization of women that had been developed and their system of savings and banking that was starting to accrue a modest balance; the forestry project which involved working with the men of the village to plant saplings; the growing recognition of the importance of health and hygiene; the support they were receiving from their menfolk in view of these changes; and the realization that if the women were able to positively influence the men of the village, then what was to stop them

having an effect on the government? The conversation continued for over an hour. One of the more outspoken women looked at Tanveer confidently, saying "with your help, we can face all our problems."³⁰

Tanveer described to me her facilitation of a debate in the previous year with women from three generations of the same family in a village not far from the city where she was based. The exercise had proved fruitful in helping to offer her "...a pretty good understanding of the rural background in constraints and blocking forces...and then to see the change". The youngest of the generations was a young woman of eighteen who had recently been granted a divorce from her husband of three years, an abusive and addicted man to whom she had been betrothed by her parents. The divorce was an unprecedented event in her community and it marked freedom from an untenable situation. Seeing this young woman as one who was enthusiastic about continuing to effect change within her community, Tanveer told me of the ideas that she had shared with her:

I said, "Look here, that's the cost of your consciousness. It is not just education that brings awareness of one's rights. Thousands of educated women are sitting idly in their houses as they are not prepared to pay the price of their freedom. This lack of awareness perpetuates their misery".

The responsibility that Tanveer was developing in these communities seemed at times overwhelming, and she talked of the way in which her leadership had taken on a cult-like mood in some areas. Similarly, one friend described her having a 'Mother Theresa' type of image in her community whereby people would lean heavily on her for advice and support. Hoping that her role inspired respect more than it did dependence, Tanveer acknowledged the need to maintain a clear focus on her vision and commitment rather than on a preoccupation with flattery. Her family's front room was an active meeting place for friends, many of whom were men, whose presence in the home caused considerable anxiety to Tanveer's mother. Unrelated males were not normally welcome in a traditional home, and yet many came to seek counsel from or to participate in intellectual debates with Tanveer. Wielding increasing influence as the

³⁰ Translated by Tanveer.

family's breadwinner (and more so since the recent death of her father), Tanveer had coaxed her mother into a position of reluctant compromise on this troublesome issue.

Tanveer and I talked of matters relating to her reputation in the community on the rooftop of her home one evening, surrounded by the scattered noises of the neighbourhood. Looking out across the other rooftops surrounding her current home of five years, we could see the movement in the open courtyards of several households. She talked nostalgically about her former home where she had grown up. The house now occupied by her sister's family was located in a neighbourhood some distance away, where the community had been closer than this one, like an extended family.

With responsibility and mobility, however, comes scrutiny from both personal and professional communities. In a culture with strict regulations directed toward women, enforced through the religious authorities as well as the more tacit directives of custom and tradition, anyone with a high profile is forced into a position of magnified concern that demands constant reflexive attention. The potential for scandal was a concern to this unmarried woman in her twenties who was professionally mobile, both regionally and internationally. As a result, Tanveer was forced to walk a careful line of moral and ethical conduct that she often found stifling. In the absence of such attentiveness, even intimations at 'emancipation' were often interpreted as Western in origin, and thereby lacking in moral foundation. Relationships outside of marriage and beyond the brotherly boundaries of friendship were unthinkable. Tanveer saw herself under a microscope³¹, and spoke of the associated difficulties and sacrifices:

I realized that far from being ahead of this society, I had to wage a relentless struggle just for my survival. So, on the one hand, I kept challenging the given notions, and on the other, I drew some self-imposed lines - a personal code of conduct. I said to myself, "no such relationship with a man".

³¹ An image that I suggested when I had observed her life long enough to see the extent to which her behaviour was rigorously monitored. She agreed with this analogy and frequently used it in subsequent conversations.

Even the friendships with men that offered her social and intellectual support were accompanied by a risk of misinterpretation and, on occasion, there arose confusion about her loyalties among them. Within this large network of 'brothers', Tanveer's behaviour and movements seemed also to reflect on them and thereby demand, in a broad sense, a protection of her reputation which affected the honour of her family and friends. She talked at length about this tight corner in her life. As a result of such social pressures at home and in her work, Tanveer explained that she had to be calculating about "to whom I can joke and at what level". She was also constantly attentive to her appearance. While in her daily urban life, she wore the standard *duppatta*, she carried a more concealing *chador* with her to the rural areas.³² Commenting on the difficulties of her work among a male group of rural colleagues, she rhetorically asked:

The question was how to avoid undue scandals. I took a big shawl with a very traditional look. Mentally, I felt free and enjoyed my freedom, but I respected the traditional values of the people I was working with. I knew that any casual or loose statement could be interpreted in many ways.

We walked one day across the vast marble courtyard of the mosque toward the curtained area where women were permitted to gather, outside of the inner enclosed sanctuary where only men worshipped. I struggled to cover my head with the *duppatta* Tanveer had generously loaned to me with the *shalwar kameez* that was infinitely more acceptable than the longest of the skirts I had brought with me.³³ Behind the curtains, a handful of women sat and talked quietly and a few individuals appeared to be praying. Having seen similar groupings in other tombs and shrines we visited, Tanveer shared her observations about the advantages of this kind of meeting place for Muslim women. She was, in fact, still in the process of completing a paper about this aspect of female mobility whereby these holy locations offered

³² In making this choice, Tanveer followed a course of action that some reformists criticize in men who advocate that female activists from the "middle and upper classes should themselves don the chador to enable other women to identify with their struggles for the larger cause of women's social and economic rights" (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987:78).

³³ Tanveer, her family and colleagues appeared relieved to see me in regional dress, and constantly reinforced my modest purchases of outfits with expressive compliments. Initially, I had been unsure as to the appropriateness of immediately adopting local dress. Very quickly, however, I realized the importance of meeting expectations for female modesty and I felt more comfortable and less apart.

to some Muslim women a rare opportunity to gather in the public sphere without undue suspicion or controversy.

Other forces, beyond the domestic and professional spheres had helped to shape Tanveer's future. In particular, two men had influenced Tanveer's life most forcefully through friendships that she also marked as significant turnings, but from which she had distanced herself by the time of our meeting. One had been her tutor, with an intellectual and philosophical influence that provided direction and challenge to her choices and assisted in the creation of what she termed "the vision of life". Their friendship was interrupted by a misunderstanding that related to her sisterly friendship with Akmal. The other, a peer with whom she attended university, had been committed to her over a long period of time, but had received inconsistent encouragement regarding the possibility of marriage as Tanveer sorted through the priorities of her life's responsibilities. By the time she was ready to consider marriage, he was, and chose to remain, betrothed to an illiterate woman from his family's natal village. In Tanveer's account of this harshly disillusioning event, it seemed that her social mobility in the form of her intellect, her profession and her somewhat unorthodox social behaviour ultimately challenged this man whose activities and mobility would, she assumed, not be limited in any way by his chosen bride.³⁴

Tanveer's mentors did not include women, though a close friendship with a senior female professor of philosophy had endured to the extent that she shared many experiences with her. Of the rare incidents of fond criticism offered by colleagues, one related to Tanveer's apparent reluctance to associate with other women of her intellectual and professional calibre. Instead, she was seen to surround herself with "students" to whom she could pass along her knowledge and with older intellectuals who were on the

³⁴ Hearing of Tanveer's "case study" (as my work had come to be known), this friend requested that he meet me, and was obliged by being invited by Tanveer to the house to do so. I was not clear on the reasons for this visit given the strained relationship with Tanveer since his marriage. Possibly, the interview provided an opportunity for a rare visit with his old friend. Alternatively, he may have felt that our meeting might serve to edit his part of their story that he knew her to be telling.

periphery of the mainstream world in which Tanveer was an expert. Tanveer disagreed strongly with this view of her choice of company, attributing the criticism to previous conflicts with the person concerned. However, keeping company for the most part with a group of intellectually stimulating and devoted friends and colleagues who were mostly male, she did not appear to actively seek out friendships with women despite her ability to skilfully interact with women of disparate cultures throughout the country and at international meetings. An exception, whom I met later in my visit, was a graduate of Tanveer's program, a female physician, whose devotion to Tanveer as her teacher matched that expressed by so many others. "She is my ideal" she replied when asked about Tanveer and her work. With this professional woman, there was no mood of competition and Tanveer seemed able to relax and share closer moments.

Within her household, Tanveer enjoyed the company of her sister and mother as well as those family members who visited regularly. The television was often on, and heated debates about domestic matters would frequently compete with a loud movie while unrelated male guests waited patiently for Tanveer in the front room. This environment represented for Tanveer the weight of heavy responsibility which involved her mother's health, her sister's education and all the associated duties related to the general running of the home. In spite of her commitment to the health of her family, Tanveer seemed to have little patience for domestic chores and left these largely in the hands of others during the time I spent in her home. One day demanded her participation in the preparation of a meal and we sat in the kitchen as she prepared *chapatis* (flat bread common to the subcontinent). Her expertise in the task was evident, as was her lack of enthusiasm for an activity that seemed to demand too much of her precious time.

"What do you do for fun?" I asked in another moment when I was sensing the draining effect of her responsibilities. A wry smile accompanied her response which spoke of intellectual debate as the source of most satisfaction in her life. In the field, however, I was to witness a different kind of pleasure and fulfilment in her expression and her voice as she met with villagers and spoke to her colleagues about

visible changes in their communities. A remarkable side to Tanveer in this setting among her colleagues and students was a mood that was clear, driven, enthusiastic and very positive - in contrast to a controlled tension she revealed in the city amidst intense responsibilities. A colleague also noted this contrasting mood when Tanveer went to the rural areas:

In the field, she goes crazy and she goes ill..she falls ill. She gives so much emotionally as well as physically....in one day she would try to give maximum kind of a thing as if that's the last day.

Notwithstanding the significant degree of seriousness that Tanveer's life entailed, laughter was not too distant from her regular interactions with friends where conversation often took the form of humorous bantering and plays with words. In lighter moments in our own conversations, Tanveer would throw her hand in the air to meet my hand in a clap that accompanied laughter - a shared moment of communication where our gendered selves appeared to transcend the barriers of otherness.

Reflecting on the meeting which began this story, Tanveer explained that in sharing some of her life's information with this group of men, she was attempting to illustrate the differences between male and female experiences, and the demands that these differences placed on her mobility and behaviour:

It was difficult, because to transform the social values of the people, I had to be very calculating. In your country, you don't face such constraints and you can freely interact with the people, but here, I have to manage my behaviour.

Always rational and "calculating", Tanveer carefully monitored her actions and behaviour in order to present the most respectable image to a society that could turn doubt into disgrace or, worse, into dishonour. She had developed a strong tendency toward rigorous, moral self-examination that kept her alert to each situation that she encountered and the appropriateness of her (often gendered) response. Nourishing her spirit, however, was a passionate love of philosophy and poetry that had inspired her to translate a number of works into published texts. She often read or quoted poetry in the company of friends. A particular attraction was to the work of the classical Nineteenth Century Mughal poet, Ghalib,

from whose extensive works she could reputedly quote verses that pertained to every kind of life event³⁵:

He is not just a poet; he is a towering philosopher also. My master's thesis was on the metaphysical tradition of Ghalib's poetry. Reading his work gave moorings to my understanding of things. His verse is so pregnant with profound connotations; I could not be content with only the emotional content of a poet's work. I have a preference for a blend of sentiments and reason. In Ghalib, we have that. Many students of poetry are inspired by the emotional verve of poetry, but I place Ghalib above everyone else.

Indeed, Tanveer insisted on a rational approach to all life events. Toward the midpoint of my stay, as we were on our way to dinner with a friend, I noticed she was in a sombre, agitated mood. While this was not unusual, my sensitivity prompted me to presume that perhaps my demands on her time were wearing thin. Within minutes I was proven mistaken. Tanveer revealed that she wished to tell me about an important issue that had just arisen. Prior to our departure from her home that evening, a longstanding friend had proposed marriage. She was both surprised and perplexed, already working through a rational set of questions about the advisability of such an arrangement. In an initial response typical to my own conditioning, I asked how she "felt" about this man, a question which was greeted by a puzzled expression and dismissed with a statement to the effect that this aspect would obviously become clear in time. For the moment, it was her goal to sort through the concrete advantages and disadvantages of this potential marriage so that she could provide her friend with a prompt answer. From what I saw, this proposal forced Tanveer to review once again the myriad of issues and responsibilities that had constrained her life until this critical point. Having postponed her own wellbeing for the sake of her family for many years, and having refused previous opportunities to marry³⁶, she now faced another chance to change the solitude of responsibility and to surrender to social pressures that were becoming increasingly

³⁵ Ghalib, or Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan, reportedly admired western "rationalism" prior to the dramatic turn of events in India in 1857 when the level of violence imposed by the British altered his perspective. Aijaz Ahmad (1971:xxiv) describes Ghalib's work as a "poetry of moral privacies...For Ghalib, the particular is the universal, a man's history is the history of his intelligence, plus his emotions, plus his times". By this description, and in reading several translated *ghazals* (conventional forms of classical poetry) of Ghalib, I could better understand Tanveer's attraction to a blend of rational thought and emotion. I was surprised, however, that she was not more outwardly interested in the volumes of poetry being published by contemporary female poets. Instead, she seemed steeped in the classical tradition.

³⁶ Muslim marriages are traditionally arranged by the family. In the urban centres, however, marriages of choice among young professionals are becoming increasingly common.

difficult to face. Always focused on a vision that sought the empowerment of the communities she touched, Tanveer considered the potential for her own enhanced empowerment and for a degree of intellectual and social compatibility with this partner. In sight was the potential for relief from the isolation that her responsibilities imposed.

In addition to the practical advantages of an approach which produced tangible results, Tanveer's image was also true to her own strongly stated values. She wanted, above all, to live a "meaningful" life that could be seen as a model and which was based on carefully considered principles evolved over years of lived experience:

It is a matter of the personal values that I adopted in view of the social, political and economic realities around me. When people identify themselves with me, it gives me a great sense of strength, though I remain, in my heart, a free person. I am using the word in its positive sense, and people know that I take my freedom in a very limited sense.

Discussion

I would argue that a feminist anthropology cannot assume the willingness of women to talk, and that one avenue open to it is to investigate when and why women do talk, to assess what strictures are placed on their speech, what avenues of creativity they have appropriated, and what degrees of freedom they possess (Visweswaran 1988:37).

The Story

The preceding ethnographic description identifies the ways in which one individual has mobilized in a society whose historical, cultural and social forces discourage the mobility of women. The layered effects of colonialism, feudal control, and gender discrimination, as documented by women worldwide, provide a thick context to the edited tale of this community worker whose subaltern perspective and intellectual efforts reflect a consistent concern regarding these issues. Naturally, however, the ethnographic experiences described in this paper do not represent a generalized view of the lives of any homogeneous 'category' of women. A monolithic picture does not exist and the differences of experience

and circumstance are vast, influenced to a large degree by class differentiation (Bardhan 1991:169). Nor can the experiences described be seen as an adequate account of this one life. Rather, the text contributes to the expanding volume of literature³⁷ emerging from and about women in the subcontinent by providing a situated, phenomenological account of the experiential fabric of one woman's background in the specific context of gendered mobility.

Women as Others

Anthropologists study others as interpreters of experience. Feminists from markedly different perspectives study oppression by patriarchal orders. Both studies intersect at a juncture that identifies the notion of *differences* at the root of each discourse (Caplan 1988b:15; Strathern 1987:286). More specifically, as noted by Abu-Lughod, "the two fundamental and political systems of difference" that are at the heart of inequality and which are addressed by both fields are those of race and gender (1990:24). Over twenty years of feminist study in the West have redirected efforts to "clarifying variations in women's roles and experiences and then to understanding the construction of gender in specific social systems" (Collier & Yanagisako 1987:4). In the same time frame, South Asian women have worked toward the redefinition of mistaken assumptions about the nature of oppression in their so-called 'developing' worlds. Notwithstanding the well documented subordination of the Third World to the First World, conjectures from all sides can block progress among women. From within the Islamic feminist movement, for example, theologian Riffat Hussan (1988) proposes that while Muslim women have been oppressed, they are not oppressed in the sense that Western feminists often assume. Perceptions in South Asia, on the other hand, commonly associate the West with mass Western culture and an associated sense of moral degeneration and disintegration (Hussan 1991:12) - a view not uncommon to previous colonies where hostility persists toward continuing Western influences (Boserup 1990:24). This antagonism is perpetuated

³⁷ The literature of and about women in the sub-continent addresses a multitude of issues including, among others, poverty, gender and development, economic development, interpretation of scriptures, and the rights and status of women.

by a confusing blend of media-driven images from the West. As a result of such obstacles to understanding, women from disparate realities often fail to establish a meaningful dialogue or an "affinity built on the recognition of difference" (Abu-Lughod 1990:24). The dialogue involved in this research involved several others: myself, Tanveer and the respective social orders in which we move. Experiences in the field regularly revealed my feeling of otherness, and her apparent sense of otherness in me, to be profound. However, a tacit recognition of the "multiple identifications" of both selves occasionally helped to move us beyond the "fixed self/other or subject/object divide" of ethnography (Abu-Lughod 1990:25).

Caplan insists on a focus on the conceptions of gender held by our "subjects" in allowing them to relate their own meanings (1988b:16). Ferguson's (1990:296) view concurs in her articulation of the importance of women's participation in the context of Tanveer's field of community development:

But if we were to reverse the epistemological primacy that the 'developed' nations give themselves in constituting 'Third World' women as problems and instead make women's lives and women's ways the beginning point of our analysis, then it is the claims of the developers that come under scrutiny.

While such a centring of women was deemed 'revolutionary' twenty years ago, Caplan points to the fact that the idea of women as central remains as an extreme concept (1988b:14). Notwithstanding the sluggishness of change, the experiences of women remain grounded in a shared reality of (often strategic) movement - and one that occurs largely within the confines of male models (ibid.). Consequently, it is invariably women who share the knowledge in and comprise the audience for discussions concerning this familiar sense of otherness. In this regard, feminist and anthropological approaches emphasize that "experience thus becomes the instrument of a knowledge which cannot be appropriated by Others. It can only be shared with like persons" (Strathern 1987:287-288).

A Case of One

As Friedl describes in her presentation of stories from the women of Deh Koh, Tanveer's experiences contribute to an "understanding of what women themselves make of their position and of how

they use their culture, their relationships, and their philosophy to construct their lives and the lives of those near them" (1989:6). While not the only factor in a life of converging influences, gendered experience is central to her story. Tanveer's constructed identity was very strong and often expressed paradoxical gendered images. A *thick description* (See Geertz 1973) helps to reveal this 'untidiness' of gender that allows women to seem subordinate and autonomous in the same moment (Caplan 1988a:12)³⁸. As a central example, Tanveer's adoption of different roles, strategies and vernaculars enhanced her mobility between and amidst diverse realities. In the urban centres, where highly literate groups tended toward attempts to institute change through legislation, Tanveer moved comfortably with a reported ability to translate the experiences of her rural colleagues. Her skill was described by one friend as "significant to the extent that there was never any distance, never any differences of gender; and above all, she spoke in a language which is a reflection of their [the village participants'] own language".

Tanveer's reported and observed experiences demonstrate the adaptations that allowed her to move effectively through a wide range of environments. Her accomplishments can be summarized in four key aspects of this gendered construction of mobility: an achievement of mobility through the adoption of specific roles and tools; a level of mobility established without a corresponding rejection of tradition; a recognition of and collaboration with men as gatekeepers to traditional communities; and a tendency to be identified by others with the male model.

As an unmarried woman, Tanveer bore many of her responsibilities alone. Although she had established a wide channel of movement in the public sphere, for years she had been driven by this sense of responsibility to suppress emotional needs for companionship. Without an impeccable image in a highly attentive community, her reputation would falter. The cost of mobility had been the absorption

³⁸ Geertz's attention to reflexivity in fieldwork and to the literary aspects of ethnographic texts contributes to the development of anthropological debates and feminist discussion concerning central issues of knowledge, representation and the ambiguous value of objectivity (Abu-Lughod 1990:10-11).

of what she saw as her "best years" in the solitary and exhausting responsibilities of leadership she has assumed within and outside the family. While always immersed in the maintenance of her family's affairs and surrounded by a host of devoted colleagues and friends, Tanveer's unusual accomplishments had not only produced a sense of isolation and fatigue, but had also invited a degree of unwelcome scrutiny. In her words:

If you talk to these people, they will tell you, "Look at Tanveer, the level of freedom that she is enjoying". But they tend to ignore the costs that I have paid. They overlook this perspective, and they just see the fruit.

Tanveer's first effort to establish a foundation for enhanced mobility required accessing an advanced level of education that involved a persistent struggle to push beyond the boundaries of her family tradition and social class. Years of study and teaching spent among a highly intellectual group of friends had promoted an awareness that offered both an intellectual capacity and a degree of flexibility which she had learned to use in manoeuvring within a rigid and often unpredictable social order. Education was meaningless in her view, however, without a corresponding level of commitment to social change. Tanveer's strategies derived from a sensitivity to and knowledge about the limitations and needs of the disparate cultures she frequently encountered. Before entering rural communities, gaining the respect of male leaders who controlled access was one of the most daunting challenges facing Tanveer and her colleagues. To sustain her acceptance as well as the leaders' participation, she spoke about her own life history in order to reveal the layers of assumptions and constraints that hindered the mobility, and thereby the health, work and productivity of women. It was a patient exercise of strategic communication made more effective through a demonstrated respect for local traditions.

Constant encounters with traditional values challenged Tanveer's work. Her personal ambition was neither to protect nor defy tradition, but rather to understand its relative power in the environments she encountered. Ornamented urban women refusing to cover their heads and speaking in unfamiliar terms of women's rights did not impress the gatekeepers of traditional communities. Tanveer, unadorned and modestly presented, speaking of concrete and relevant solutions, held more assurance of enduring access.

Always accompanied by a male colleague, dressed appropriately, and communicating in understandable and practical terms, Tanveer entered virtually closed communities. Rather than a camouflage, her attention to conventional appearances and appropriate behaviours were evidence of her knowledge of tradition and its expectations.

Tanveer's gendered image can be seen as 'neutral' (or un-gendered), a feature that permitted her to blend more easily into the communities where she conducted workshops, always among unrelated males. She moved with an equal degree of confidence among and between the segregated communities of rural women and men. Nevertheless, holding more knowledge, freedom, voice and mobility than was culturally acceptable for local women, she was an enigma and was thereby placed in a category apart. In some cases, she was cast as wise and older than her years. Alternatively, she was seen as "brave" or as a son and not a daughter - a woman who could be understood only in male terms in efforts to rationalize her mobility. From these perspectives, Tanveer's male rural colleagues adopted one of two gendered approaches which both made sense of the enigma and permitted her entry: they either transformed her gender into the de-sexualized and (more legitimately) powerful realm of grandmother, or they translated her success into that of a male. While Tanveer objected to such misrepresentations of her gender and of her own achievements, she accepted the level of dissonance that her image could create in traditional communities. This conflict posed less tension among women who appeared to view Tanveer differently. Among her female peers in the urban centres, she was an ambiguous figure in the eyes of some who were reportedly uncomfortable in her presence. In contrast, her affinity with rural women resulted in their more immediate acceptance of her as a 'sister' who presented an inspiring vision that was not threatening and which promised change through active participation.

Mandelbaum sees personality defined according to the priority one assigns to experiences and attitudes collected in a life which may be known to others but "weighted" differently to the extent that "each person is both a bound actor and a free agent" (1973:194). The "weighting" (Ardener 1992:7) of

gender and its constraints in Tanveer's experience appeared to vary according to her roles and activities. In both spatial and ideological terms, Tanveer appeared to be restricted by her society where culturally available options limited many of her strategic choices. While she wished to further her education abroad, a strong commitment to family and to the promise of social change prevented even a temporary absence. Steering clear of the emerging professionalised, entrepreneurial and elitist approach to community development, she targeted grassroots efforts as a preferred avenue to democratic social transformation. Rejecting mainstream feminist efforts and their Western associations in the context of her work, she had started to move away (both figuratively and literally) from syndicated groups, focusing her attention instead on women's expressed needs at the village level. Delaying traditional expectations of an early or arranged marriage, she had discouraged previous proposals in order to fulfil an obligation to her family in the absence of her brothers. As Ardener notes, gender can also weigh differently throughout a life's course, and there are numerous examples of women who gain importance after the deaths of male family members "...in their lieu, as it were" (1992:7-8).³⁹

Much of Tanveer's experience points to an 'untidiness' of gender (Caplan 1988a:12). Moving confidently among remarkably diverse settings, she projected subtly different and sometimes contradictory gendered selves while maintaining a position of leadership, a visible degree of respect, and a firm grounding in her personal vision for social change. A paradoxical consequence of Tanveer's mobility was evident in the stifling scrutiny of her community (always more attentive to the movement of women) that contrasted with a degree of personal isolation imposed by her many responsibilities as an unmarried woman.

³⁹ Ardener (1992) discusses this phenomenon in the context of women in politics who hold power in the absence of a 'qualified' man. Examples in South Asia of the inherited power of women are found in the late Indira Gandhi and more recently, in Benazir Bhutto. While both women were elected to office, they assumed a significant degree of popularity by virtue of their fathers' respective legacies. Bardhan, however, points to a generally more autonomous involvement of women in politics in the past two decades (1991:167).

Tanveer's roles of breadwinner, family head, daughter, sister, fictive sister, social reformer, teacher, and devoted friend demanded different approaches and a wide channel of mobility. While direct experience from an urban lower middle class background contributed to her comprehension of the more restricted codes of conduct in rural areas, her academic exposure had also familiarized her with the ideologies and behaviours of more privileged classes. Her status of 'sister' among her male friends offered both protection and an enhanced degree of acceptable mobility in the public sphere. Her additional tools of intellect, dress, language, empathetic communication skills and a genuine respect for tradition offered flexibility in disparate environments. By developing this variety of roles and tools (some more gendered than others), Tanveer had become adept at carefully manipulating and monitoring her levels of mobility. Her recent grassroots work had also brought her closer to a vocation that resonated meaning in her life, demonstrating an affinity with rural women whose experiences more closely matched those of her early years than those of her urban colleagues. Tanveer's vocation and vision attempted to enhance the mobility of many others through her attention to community development - a process that involved a shift of the "power-and-knowledge focus" to smaller, localized communities (Ferguson 1990:300).

In considering this tale and discussion, it is important, as Cotterill suggests, "to devise ways of making sure the unique experience of the individual is not used to argue against women's collective interests" (1992:604)⁴⁰ Like Tanveer, many women are achieving and managing their mobility through strategic decisions in the face of overwhelming constraints in many countries. Women who can reach the most isolated corners of their worlds to directly address women's local issues and the health of their communities are complementing the important work being done through central efforts to reverse oppressive legislation and discrimination. Having achieved a level of mobility through a series of circumstances, turnings and strategic decisions, Tanveer contributes to a collective of global efforts to find concrete solutions to gendered issues.

⁴⁰ Cotterill refers to the work of Finch (1984).

Conclusion

The turnings, experiences and adaptations of this one woman's story show the degree to which mobility can be achieved and, when necessary, camouflaged in a variety of situations where the physical and ideological movement of women is severely constrained. As a thematic device, gendered mobility offers a useful lens through which gendered experience can be viewed. Tanveer's life as it was evolving when we met framed a vocation of mobility and mobilisation that was a source of inspiration for others. From an empowered sense of self, she was succeeding in empowering others.

Selected Bibliography

Abu-Lughod, Lila

1990 Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography? *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 5(1):7-27.

Ahmad, Aijaz

1971 Introduction. In *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions from the Urdu*. Aijaz Ahmad, ed. Pp. vii-xxviii. New York and London: Columbia University Press.

Ardener, Shirley

1992 Persons and Powers of Women: An Introduction. In *Persons and Powers of Women in Diverse Cultures: Essays in Commemoration of Audrey I. Richards, Phyllis Kaberry and Barbara E. Ward*. Shirley Ardener, ed. Pp. 1-10. New York and Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Bardhan, Kalpana

1991 Women and Feminism in a Stratified Society: Recent Developments in India. In *Bridging Worlds: Studies on Women in South Asia*. Sally J.M. Sutherland, ed. Pp. 163-201. Occasional Paper 17. Center for South Asia Studies. University of California at Berkeley.

Behar, Ruth

1990 Rage and Redemption: Reading the Life Story of a Mexican Marketing Woman. *Feminist Studies* (Summer) 16(2):223-258.

Boserup, Esther

1990 Economic Change and the Roles of Women. In *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development*. Irene Tinker, ed. Pp. 14-24. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bourque, Susan C., and Kay B. Warren

1991 Women, Technology, and International Development Ideologies: Analyzing Feminist Voices. In *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*. Micaela di Leonardo, ed. Pp. 278-311. Berkeley: University of California Press.

1981 *Women of the Andes: Patriarchy and Social Change in Two Peruvian Towns*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Caplan, Pat

1988a Engendering Knowledge: The Politics of Ethnography (Part 1). *Anthropology Today* 4 (5):8-12.

1988b Engendering Knowledge: The Politics of Ethnography (Part 2). *Anthropology Today* 4 (6):14-17.

- Collier, Jane F., and Sylvia J. Yanagisako
 1987 Introduction. In *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*. Jane F. Collier and Sylvia J. Yanagisako, eds. Pp. 1-13. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Cotterill, Pamela
 1992 Interviewing Women: Issues of Friendship, Vulnerability and Power. *Women's Studies International Forum* 15 (5/6):593-606.
- Ferguson, Kathy
 1990 Women, Feminism and Development. In *Women, International Development and Politics: The Bureaucratic Mire*. Kathleen Staudt, ed. Pp. 291-303. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Finch, Janet
 1984 "It's Great to Have Someone to Talk To": The Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women. In *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*. Colin Bell and Helen Roberts, eds. Pp. 70-87. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Friedl, Erika
 1989 *Women of Deh Koh: Lives in an Iranian Village*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Geertz, Clifford
 1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gordon, Deborah
 1988 Writing Culture, Writing Feminism: The Politics and Policies of Experimental Ethnography. *Inscriptions* 3/4:7-26.
- Hassan, Riffat
 1991 Is the Shari'ah Divine? In *Special Bulletin on Fundamentalism and Secularism in South Asia*. Pp. 9-12. Lahore: Shirkat Gah.
 1988 Texts and Contexts. In *Faithful Women: Womens' Interfaith Dialogue*. Part 2. Toronto: National Film Board of Canada. Videocassette.
- Hussain, Neelam
 1993 *A Simorgh Diary*. Lahore: Simorgh Women's Resource and Publication Centre.
- Jeffery, Patricia
 1979 *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah*. London: Zed Books.

Johnson-Odim, Cheryl

1991 Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third World Women and Feminism. In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds. Pp. 314-327. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Junaid, Shahwar

1991 *The Role of Women in Development: A Perspective*. Rawalpindi: Publishing Consultants (SJC).

Kumar, Nita

1992 *Friends, Brothers and Informants: Fieldwork Memoirs of Banaras*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Mandelbaum, David G.

1988 *Women's Seclusion and Men's Honour: Sex Roles in North India, Bangladesh and Pakistan*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

1973 The Study of Life History: Gandhi. *Current Anthropology* (June) 14(3):177-205.

Marcus, George E.

1986 Contemporary Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World System. In *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. James C. Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. Pp. 165-193. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mohanty, Chandra T.

1991 Introduction: Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism. In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds. Pp. 1-47. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

1984 Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Boundary 2* (Spring/Fall) 12(3)/13(1):333-358.

Mumtaz, Khawar and Farida Shaheed

1987 *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* London and New Jersey: Zed Books.

Papanek, Hanna

1982 Purdah in Pakistan: Seclusion and Modern Occupations for Women. In *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*. Hanna Papanek and Gail Mineault, eds. Pp. 190-216. Delhi: Chanakya Publications.

1973 Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15:289-325.

Parajuli, Pramod

1991 Power and Knowledge in Development Discourse: New Social Movements and the State in India. *International Social Sciences Journal* 43:173-190.

Pastner, Carrol McC.

1990 A Social, Structural and Historical Analysis of Honour, Shame and Purdah in Baluchistan. In *Pakistan: The Social Sciences Perspective*. Akbar S. Ahmed, ed. Pp. 247-259. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Puri, Balraj

1988 Pakistan's 'Benazir' (Unique Revolution). *Manushi: A Journal About Women in Society* 49: 3-5.

Shaheed, Farida

1991 The Cultural Articulation of Patriarchy. In *Finding Our Way: Readings on Women in Pakistan*. Fareeha Zafar, ed. Pp. 135-158. Lahore: ASR Publications.

1990 *Pakistan's Women: An Analytical Description*. Lahore: Shirkat Gah.

Shaheed, Farida, and Khawar Mumtaz

1990 *Women's Economic Participation in Pakistan: A Status Report*. Lahore and Islamabad: Shirkat Gah for UNICEF Pakistan.

Staudt, Kathleen

1990 Context and Politics in the Gendered Bureaucratic Mire. In *Women, International Development and Politics: The Bureaucratic Mire*. Kathleen Staudt, ed. Pp. 304-313. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Strathern, Marilyn

1987 An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology. *Signs* 12(2): 276-292.

Visweswaran, Kamala

1988 Defining Feminist Ethnography. *Inscriptions* 3/4:7-44.

Watson, Lawrence and Maria B. Watson-Franke

1985 *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Weiss, Anita

1991 Working Women in the City of Lahore: Opportunities, Deals and Social Constraints. In *Bridging Worlds: Studies on Women in South Asia*. Sally J.M. Sutherland, ed. Pp. 245-264. Occasional Paper 17. Center for South Asia Studies. University of California at Berkeley.

Whittaker, Elvi

1994 Decolonizing Knowledge: Towards a Feminist Ethic and Methodology. In *East and West: Perspectives on Canada and India*. Hugh Johnston and C. Gerwal, eds. New Delhi: Sage. In press.

Young, Michael

1983 Our Name is Women: We Are Bought With Limesticks and Limepots: An Analysis of the Autobiographical Narrative of a Kalauna Woman. *Man* 18(3):478-501.