

## **Sex and Other Social Devices**

By DALIA SOFER

Published: February 6, 2009

Reading Daniyal Mueenuddin's mesmerizing first collection, "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders," is like watching a game of blackjack, the shrewd players calculating their way beyond their dealt cards in an attempt to beat the dealer. Some bust, others surrender. But in Mueenuddin's world, no one wins.

Set in the Pakistani district of Punjab, the eight linked stories in this excellent book follow the lives of the rich and power-ful Harouni family and its employees: man-agers, drivers, gardeners, cooks, servants.

The patriarch, K. K. Harouni, of the feudal landowning class, owns a farm in Dunya-pur and a mansion in Lahore. In the title story, we meet him in the final years of his life, living mostly in Lahore, apart from his estranged wife, having surrendered the management of his farm to the corrupt Chaudrey Jaglani. When Husna, a distant relative whose branch of the family "had not so much fallen into poverty as failed to rise," shows up at his door, Harouni takes her in, first as a servant, then as his mistress. For the aging paterfamilias, Husna is a distraction whose unrefined speech and manners offer a temporary escape from the infinite politesse of his own class. For her part, Husna, a more hard-boiled Madame Bovary, envious of the glittering, jet--setting lives of the rich, ingratiates herself to the old man through calculated flirtations, believing sex is her ticket out of her lowly status. And for a while she is right. Until she no longer is.

The women in these stories often use sex to prey on the men, and they do so with abandon at best and rage at worst — in this patriarchal, hierarchical society, it is their sharpest weapon. Women in the lower classes sleep their way up only to be kicked back down, while those in the upper classes use their feminine influence to maneuver their husbands into ever-growing circles of power, until age corrodes their authority.

In the only story in which the main characters are of similar social status, Lily, a girl from a reputable Punjabi family who has spent her youth attending stylish parties and having casual sex, hopes to improve herself morally by marrying a kind, hard-working man of her own class. Like all other attempts at betterment in Mueenuddin's world, this too fails, as Lily slowly reverts to her old ways. Motion in Pakistani society — be it social or moral — can only be horizontal.

But the women are not alone in their scheming. Manipulation unifies these stories, running through them as consistently as the Indus River flows south of Punjab. A dance of insincere compliments and favors asked at just the right moment — when the supplicant detects a benevolent mood — is performed by every-one. This bewildering pas de deux is familiar to all but the two American characters, whose ignorance causes grief to themselves and others.

Corruption too is ubiquitous here. Nawabdin the electrician cheats the electric company; Chaudrey Jaglani sells Harouni's vast lands at half price, keeping the best parcels for himself. For

a country whose name means “land of purity,” Pakistan is startlingly blemished. Yet Mueenuddin’s talent lets us perceive not just its machinations but also its beauty — the mango orchards, a charpoy laid out in the shade of a mammoth banyan tree, the smoke of a hookah on a spring afternoon, “eucalyptus trees planted by some briefly energetic government.”

In this labyrinth of power games and exploits, Mueenuddin inserts luminous glimmers of longing, loss and, most movingly, unfettered love. But these emotions are often engulfed by the incessant chaos of this complicated country. As Lily tells her eventual husband in a rare moment of quietude: “You know what’s amazing, we’re actually alone here. That never happens in Pakistan.”

*Dalia Sofer is the author of the novel “The Septembers of Shiraz.”*