ON SERVITUDE AND DIVISION OF LABOR IN PAKISTAN AND AMERICA

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Every year that we intend to spend the summer in Pakistan, my mother spends at least two months beforehand assembling gifts for the multitude of people we know there. She buys chocolates and sneakers for my cousins, perfumes and wristwatches for my uncles, purses for her college friends, sweaters for my grandparents, and often a pair of shoes for Yunis Chacha. "Chacha" means uncle, but while Yunis knows my face and age and predilection for tandoori naan, I don't call him "uncle" because he's related to me by blood: Yunis Chacha is my grandparents' oldest servant.

At first glance, servitude in Pakistan and America seem vastly different, and not only because Pakistani family members are so familiar with their employees. Almost every practice, from hiring servants to asking them to serve dinner, differs in these two countries. Yet I feel the same guilt tiptoeing around the workers from the cleaning service my parents hire in suburban Pittsburgh as I do asking Yunis Chacha to make me tea. Why is this so? Barbara Ehrenreich, author of "Maid to Order," might be able to help explain my moral distress. For this article in *Harper's*, she spent several months working as a maid for a corporate cleaning service in Maine. Through an exploration of class, gender, subjugation and personal moral development, Ehrenreich raises this question: "As the home becomes a workplace for someone else"—in Pakistan or America—"is it still a place where you want to live?" (62).

The middle-class Pakistani household is distinct from its American counterpart in many ways. In my grandparents' home, for example, three employees are almost always present: a watchman for the gate, a cook, and another catch-all employee (he's the one sent out for quick errands or the one who sets the table for tea). A woman comes by every day to do the laundry and clean; the gardener comes by every second or third day. My parents' house, situated in a comfortable Pittsburgh suburb, is miles away from Pakistan not only geographically but also atmospherically. Though my parents are objectively better off than the preceding generation, they cook their own food and make their own beds. They do, however, hire a landscaping service and a cleaning service—practices that are becoming increasingly popular amongst upper-middle-class professionals (Ehrenreich 62).

It's true that my family benefits from these workers, but isn't it true that I benefit from the work of others every single day? I do not weave and stitch my own clothes—nor do I grow or cook much of the food I eat. As Ehrenreich puts it, "Why should housework, among all the goods and services we consume, arouse any special angst?" (69). She provides the answer to her own question—housework is different from other products and services "because of its proximity to the activities that compose 'private'

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life" (69). Furthermore, she claims that having maids in the house can damage one's moral character. According to Ehrenreich, having maids teaches children to valorize their own personal worth and time more than that of others (i.e., their parents' employees). Because children with maids never have to clean up after themselves, they don't learn responsibility and therefore "achieve a certain magical weightlessness and immateriality" (70).

This is the weakest aspect of Ehrenreich's argument: unlike the rest of her article, in which she bolsters her arguments with empirical observations based on personal experience or statistical data, here she makes a generalized, value-laden statement about a large number of people without citing any sources. True, some children who grow up in homes with maids might become lazy and inconsiderate individuals, but is that always the case? I have not found it to be so. Personally, I am morally troubled by hiring others in my home, but not because I don't always pick up my own socks. Some of my friends here in college have grown up with maids as well, but they don't expect fairies to come down and dust their tables—they do it themselves. Hiring maids simply cannot be morally troubling because of the nature or location of the work in question, so something else must be at play.

In Pakistan, there is no shame in employing servants: virtually all middle-class and upper-class households have them. Having not grown up constantly in Pakistani society, when I return, I invariably feel guilty asking Yunis Chacha to make me tea or bring dinner to my room—requests my relatives insist are nothing out of the ordinary. Yet no matter how many times my aunt patiently explains that we're actually doing his family a service by hiring him, I cannot come to terms with it. It is true that the economy in Pakistan is not as stable or as successful as that of America's. Because of the lack of a good public education system, poor individuals, especially in rural areas, are unable to accrue skills that would enable them to attain middle-class jobs in the future. They then rely on the middle and upper classes for employment. Therefore, being a servant in a home is an important niche in the lower-class job spectrum. If servitude is such a vital part of the economy and way of life, why should I be disgusted with myself when, possessing two healthy legs and knowledge of the house's layout, I wish to ask Yunis Chacha to get me tea?

Bruce Robbins, author of "The Sweatshop Sublime," helps me to better understand my aunt's position, but he also broadens my dilemma:

> [D]isgust with dependence on the work of other people in the home risks passing over into disgust with the dependence on the work of other people in general—a disgust with being a part of a highly elaborate division of labor. Yet learning to be a part of that division is a precondition for almost any progressive politics, nationally and internationally. (92)

It makes sense: middle- and upper-class households in Pakistan, by hiring lower-class servants, provide those individuals with jobs. This interdependence is characteristic of our international system—as American consumers, we rely on Chinese laborers to produce clothes and Mexican immigrants to pick vegetables. It is unrealistic for us to expect to function without dependence on services, without dependence on the labor of other people. What difference does it make if workers are sweating away in a field hundreds of miles away or if they're in the sweatshops that we call home?

It does make a difference. In his essay, Robbins recounts Kant's definition of the sublime, in which there is a "feeling of the inadequacy of the imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, wherein the imagination reaches its maximum, and, in striving to surpass it, sinks back into itself, by which, however, a kind of emotional satisfaction is produced" (85). Robbins applies this idea within the modern context of globalization and sweatshops. In short, there are times in which comfortable, upper-middle-class individuals feel momentarily guilty about Chinese sweatshop laborers who've toiled over their clothing for little to no pay, but this feeling quickly passes. Upper-middle-class individuals are satisfied to have at least briefly contemplated the problem, but as they do not interrupt the routine of their daily lives in an attempt to solve it, it has no lasting effect. This sensation is more difficult to produce when the sweatshop is one's own home: lacking the luxury of having their laborers separated from them by languages or miles, homeowners hiring maids or employing servants must face the laborers working for them every single day.

What, then, is the problem? If division of labor is an acceptable part of life, then why should an employer feel guilty about bringing workers into her home? In "Maid to Order," Ehrenreich nails the answer: "Housework was not degrading because it was manual labor . . . but because it was embedded in degrading relationships and inevitably served to reinforce them" (61). She is speaking within a feminist context, but gender relations are not the only hierarchies reinforced through household labor. Just as women have been professionally restricted because of their obligation to the bathroom floor and the kitchen table, certain families in Pakistan have been generationally disadvantaged because of their roles as household servants.

The Pakistani public education system is absolutely dismal: it yields no opportunities for the already disadvantaged to improve their station. Graduate and professional schools are only realistic ambitions for children whose parents have attended those types of schools. Yunis Chacha's daughter Aliya is an excellent illustration of this point: Yunis has been employed in my grandparents' home for over forty years, and his daughter, when she was of an able age to work, joined him at his workplace. Whereas he would cook dinner and brew tea, she would make beds and wash clothes. Aliya stopped going to school at the age of thirteen to help her parents bring in an income; her children will likely stop going to school at the same age, and for the same reason. My mother and her siblings, on the other hand, who grew up at the same time as Aliya, all went to private schools, completed graduate school, and went on to lead comparatively affluent and comfortable lives.

The guilt I feel when I ask Yunis Chacha to bring me tea is not so much my disgust with division of labor as a whole. It is much more complicated than that. It is my recognition that his role as a worker in my house is representative of our respective roles in Pakistani society, which reflects not only our socioeconomic statuses, but also those of our children and grandchildren. In Pakistan, both wealth and poverty are maintained throughout generations because the barriers to social mobility are staggeringly high. The guilt is recognition of precisely this: Yunis Chacha probably never chose his line of work, and he and his successive generations are stuck in a rut of servitude, whereas I, daughter of professionals and student at a renowned university, have myriad opportunities available to me, ripe for the picking. The problem is not that there is servitude; it is that I will never have to be a servant. I do not feel guilty because I go to an Ivy League school, but because Aliya will never be able to.

Is American society really so different from the one half a world away? I would argue—and Ehrenreich might agree—that social mobility in these two countries is more similar than it seems at first glance. Whereas housework in Pakistan is emblematic of generational poverty, in America housework is representative of the subjugation of women and minorities. Ehrenreich claims that "the association between housecleaning and minority status is well established in the psyches of the white employing class" (63). This is not without any basis in reality: "One thing you can say with certainty about the population of household workers," Ehrenreich claims, "is that they are disproportionately women of color: 'lower' kinds of people for a 'lower' kind of work. Of the 'private household cleaners and servants' it managed to locate in 1998, the Bureau of Labor statistics reports that 36.8 percent were Hispanic, 15.8 percent black, and 2.7 percent 'other'" (63). Furthermore, studies conducted by *The New York Times* for the recent series "Class Matters" concluded that social mobility in America is not quite as attainable as it seems. Data from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s show that people are increasingly remaining in their socioeconomic class: while in the 1970s, 35 percent of people stayed in their class, in the 1990s 40 percent did (Leonhardt). Additionally, whereas 27 percent of families were able to move up or down two quintiles in the 1970s, only 21 percent were able to do so in the 1990s (Leonhardt). People in America are becoming less able, on average, to change their socioeconomic class. Since in America race and class often come paired, this means not only that the country experiences generational poverty to an extent that we do not realize, it also means that generational poverty is occurring in a disproportionately high number of minority families.

Robbins has a point: division of labor is necessary, inside and outside the home, and it is not useful to decry the fact that people outsource the loathsome task of wiping the toilet seat simply because wiping the toilet seat is in and of itself distasteful. It is simply the case that the world is interdependent and that within this complex system of divided labor there are tasks less desirable than others. It is not so much a problem that division of labor exists and that within it there is a hierarchy. There is a problem in that division of labor *maintains* a certain hierarchy. This is the point Ehrenreich recognizes, and addresses well: housework has become symbolic of historic exploitation of gender, class, and race. In both Pakistan and America, housework is simply the obvious example of a much greater problem. The solution would be to make social mobility a more feasible reality, especially for the historically disadvantaged. That task is an enormous one, however: too great for the confines of these pages. Hopefully, by furthering discourse on these important topics, we can come to a greater understanding of them and enable ourselves to address them in the future.

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