Control and subversion: gender, islam, and socialism in Tajikistan
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CHAPTER 6
THE INDIVIDUAL UNMASKED

When the pressure to conform to accepted standards of gender performance is lessened, both males and females may remove their gender masks and show themselves to be very different from the way they usually behave, as can be seen from the conduct of Jahongul and Rustam.

One day I accompanied Jahongul to the office of an important personage in Dushanbe, a woman a few years older than myself. The change that came over Jahongul in her presence was quite startling. The lively, chatty teenager, cheerfully giving me her opinions on everyone we passed in the street, turned into a bashful and timid young woman. Head hung, eyes fixed on the floor, hardly able to open her mouth, Jahongul almost whispered her answers. 'Look up, girl, and speak to me directly,' she was told, but the more she was ordered to do this, the more intimidated she became. Afterwards when I walked her home she was still constrained. I asked her what had come over her, why she had been so different. Jahongul replied that this was how a girl was supposed to behave in front of important people, even schoolteachers. In front of her mother too Jahongul was different from the way she was with me, less free, much quieter.

Rustam almost transforms himself in front of different people. Even his face changes, to the point where it is hard to recognise him as the same person. With his colleagues at work, with his parents, alone with me, Rustam presents extraordinarily different personas.

Of course, to a certain extent everyone makes these types of changes. However, in Tajikistan they assume a ritual quality which I am convinced is linked to a whole spectrum of gender performances, accompanied as they are by specific physical attributes. The downcast eyes and hung head seem to be something that all girls have absorbed by the end of puberty. Boys do this much less. However, Rustam notably finds it difficult not to assume this stance whenever he is in the presence of anyone in authority. As I noted in my diary on the occasion of our first meeting - 'This young man seems pleasant but very shy. He was unable even once to lift his eyes to mine'.

To phrase it differently, the expressions accompanying the variant gender performances almost seem to reproduce in visible form the concept of the masks I introduced in chapter 1. As I said there the masks serve to introduce stock characters, to make it easier for an audience to grasp what they are seeing. Jahongul comes on stage and there she is - a submissive and obedient girl. Rustam does likewise. Such masks are useful to the actors because they stop people looking more closely at them and thus perhaps observing the irregularities and imperfections they are trying to hide behind their performances.

Although both Jahongul and Rustam, when he got to know me better, were able to chat in my presence with a freedom that I did not see them exhibit elsewhere, this does not, of course, mean that what I was seeing was not just another mask. However, with me there was no pre-set model. No-one had taught them how one behaved in front of a foreign researcher who clearly did not follow the same conventions they lived by, whose own gender performance was quite different from those they were accustomed to, who did not tell them off no matter what, and who seemed to be interested in listening to everything they had to say.
It seemed to me that in fact they were relieved not to have to put on the same display as with other people and that they truly did let down their guard with me to a considerable extent, as the stories here and in the next chapter particularly demonstrate.

The Dreams of Youth

You have met Jahongul and her elder sister Tahmina in previous chapters. They are the two eldest daughters of a family of three girls and two boys, living in the centre of Dushanbe. Their father was a factory inspector, murdered when they were very young, just as he was about to blow the whistle on fraud, leaving their mother, Nahdiya, to raise her children entirely on her own. Nahdiya's own father had also been killed when she was a child and her mother had no resources, so that they are all very poor. Nahdiya worked in a jewellery factory before the civil war. She is only barely functionally literate. Despite years of living in Dushanbe and of interactions with her mostly Russian neighbours her Russian is not very good, but even her Tajik is highly ungrammatical. Nahdiya's husband, however, was educated and had wanted all his children to be so too. She would very much like to be able to fulfil his wish, especially as she believes that only education can give her children a chance to raise their standards of living.

When I first met them in early 1995 the eldest brother, Farhod had been married for several years and was living in Kofernihon near his wife's family. As was recounted in chapter 5, Tahmina was living unhappily in her husband's village. The younger three children were still living at home.

Sixteen-year-old Jahongul is in her last year at high school. She has many thoughts about life, thoughts that she cannot share with her family. She frequently comes over to see me and talks to me at length about her wishes and dreams. She is so happy to have someone who listens to her that she pours out her words almost like a stream of consciousness. Often what she says on one occasion contradicts her previous statements but she does not seem to remember what she has said before, and just rattles on wherever her mind takes her at that moment. In the following pages I have put together extracts from a number of conversations that took place over a period of several months in the first half of 1995:

Jahongul feels very sad for her sister. But she has taken what happened to her to heart and this has made her consider how her own future might turn out. Like Tahmina Jahongul also wants very much to study but realises that very likely this will depend on her future husband and his family. This has proved negative for her sister and she dreads the fact that it will prove so for her as well. In Tajikistan women have to do what their husbands tell them. If they insist on their staying home and not studying or working there is nothing women can do about it. Jahongul does not think this is fair but this is just how it is here. Like her sister before her Jahongul will not have anything to do with boys. The last thing she wants, in fact, is to marry for love. She says she does not trust any man. She has seen enough of marital relationships to know how badly most men treat their wives, whether or not they have married for love. 'If I choose my own husband', she says, 'then he will be my responsibility. If he treats me badly I will have nowhere to turn to. My family will say, 'You chose him, now you have to put up with him.' But if
my mother chooses him and something goes wrong I will say to her, 'He is your son-in-law, you chose him, do something, protect me.'

Jahongul says that if a boy says he loves her she doesn't want to see him again. She basically thinks most boys are fools and doesn't want to have anything to do with them. Maybe someday she'll fall in love and then it will be okay. On the whole she wants a man to fall harder for her than she for him so that she has some power over him.

Jahongul says, 'We Tajik women are brought up to allow men to order us about; that is our tradition. There is nothing one can do to change traditions.' 'Why not?' I ask. Jahongul replies 'How would it be possible? 'Perhaps not for everyone but what about for you personally? Do you think you could change for yourself those customs you don't find good?' Jahongul didn't know, but she did think that the best marriage would be one where both parties had equal weight.

On another occasion Jahongul said she wished she'd been born into a Russian family so that she could go around with boys like Russians do, without incurring the sort of problems that Tajik girls have if they do this. However, she says one disadvantage for Russians is that they have to find their own marriage partners and sometimes a girl can date a boy for ages and he will never marry her.

Jahongul thinks that nowadays a husband is pointless, as few men can earn enough money to be worthwhile. Maybe it would be best not to marry at all. The most important thing in life is happiness and this comes from having everything. That is, one's own home, and a husband and children, and a job at which one doesn't have to work more than two hours a day. But it is important to find the right husband. Jahongul will have a competition. First she will study for four years and only after this start looking round to meet someone. Then she will spend a year observing him closely. If she doesn't find anyone she likes then she will live without a husband. I ask her whether it would really be possible to do this. She said it would. She could work and buy herself a flat near her mother's place and live there alone. She and her girlfriends would all meet once a week and she would have a good life. Of course, she would not be able to have children without a husband but that would not matter. If necessary she could adopt a child from an orphanage because after all it would not be much fun entirely living by herself. The best would be to live with a girlfriend who also doesn't want to get married but she knows that whatever they may say now, all her girlfriends will accept immediately if someone comes to ask for their hand, and that will be that.

Jahongul says she will not be like that. She sees absolutely no reason whatever to marry. However, she knows she must. If only she could find a non-aggressive man, reasonably handsome, with a good income, and a university degree, a good person, not the sort to shout at his wife, someone who would respect her. But such young men don't exist in Dushanbe today. On the contrary, they have all learned how to behave with women from watching foreign films and they call out to girls in the street and make it horrible to go out by oneself and in general she thinks the best thing would be to shoot them all. In fact, Jahongul says she would like the war to start up again just so every young man in Tajikistan could be shot and so she wouldn't have to put up with all the stupid fools around the place.
Jahongul's idea of a good husband: First, he would be taller than she is. Secondly, he would be independent of his parents, earn a good living and have a flat of his own. A car would be nice too, but that could come later. He should be able to provide for her properly. She doesn't want a rich man because then he would perhaps want more than one wife. Jahongul says she despises men who are too spineless to stick up for themselves. She thinks it is about time young people made their own decisions about how to live their lives and parents didn't interfere. She hopes her husband will have the guts to stick up for what he wants and not allow his parents to boss him around. However, she fears her fate will be the same as Tahmina's and she will end up living in a village and wearing a big headscarf. She does not think Tahmina's husband is so very unsatisfactory, because he is very fair and does not treat her too badly, at least he doesn't beat her.

Jahongul wants everything - that is she wants there to be money and goods in the shops and for her mother not to have to go to trade in the market on the weekend and for her to have her own house and a car. She wants there to be proper lessons at school every day and to get into college and to be a student. She also wants to be the best student in her class so that everyone will look at her and envy her. She doesn't know what might be the best career for a woman - journalism, business, or something else. On the other hand she would quite like to be a secretary; she already has her typing diploma. (Although how she managed this I do not know). She barely knows where the letters are on the keyboard and her speed is tortoise-like. She might like to go to technical college to study to be a hairdresser, seamstress or bookkeeper. She doesn't really know - just as long as she does something and doesn't just leave school at seventeen.

What she really wants is to be a lawyer and defend people, or perhaps to be a famous couturier and have everyone wear her designs, or a beautician or a hairdresser or maybe a midwife, which is only three years study. Whatever happens, the most important thing is to study somewhere and lead a student lifestyle. But in the end, most important of all, is to have a diploma and for people to say that Jahongul graduated from such and such an institute. But perhaps after all she doesn't really want to study and has only consented to think about it because her mother wants this so much. If she doesn't study she'll work somewhere, anywhere just as long as it is not in a factory.

Jahongul wants to know everything. By everything she means medicine and sewing and cooking. What she most likes to do is to cook, and to clean so that everything in the house shines. But she would like to have her own office and secretary and order

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1 Compare this with a comment from before the Revolution: Every first wife prays God that her husband may never become rich, so that she may be his only wife always. We are happy if there is just enough money to buy food and drink. If there is a little over there comes a new wife, and our happiness is gone. Thus said a woman in Tajik-cultured Samarkand to Annette Meakin around a century ago (Meakin 1903: 140).

2 This is a reference to the Islamic head-veil, a scarf worn over head and neck, as opposed to the small headscarves customarily worn by Tajik women with their national dress which are tied at the back, leaving both hair and neck visible.
everyone around. She would like to marry a medical student so that she could have free medicine and medical care.

Her friends discuss what would happen if their husbands were to marry a second or third wife. One said - 'I'll be first and senior wife. I'll have all his keys, so that I won't have any problem. Another said, 'He can divorce me and I'll keep the house and will be able to live happily and marry again for love if I choose'. Jahongul asked them 'What if your husband keeps his keys himself, then what will you do?'

In summer 1995 Jahongul left school. Soon afterwards, an offer of marriage was made for her. This time her mother, hoping not to make the same mistake as with Tahmina, insisted that she make her own decision whether to accept or not. The two families were not acquainted and Jahongul had never set eyes on the man whom she was being asked to marry but after thinking about it a little she agreed to marry him, anyway. The deciding factor was that he lived in Dushanbe and had his own small flat, only a couple of miles from the centre of town, albeit in the same building as his parents’ flat, and was making a reasonable income from currency dealing.

By the time I returned to Dushanbe in December of that year Jahongul was married. Her mother had arranged for her to enter commercial school and she was studying to become a bookkeeper. In early 1996 she became pregnant but, after many hours of labour, her child was stillborn. The experience left her so shaken she swore she would not soon, if ever, allow herself to become pregnant again. In spring 1997 there was a typhoid epidemic in Dushanbe, and Jahongul became sick after drinking water from a tap in the street. She remained in hospital for some weeks and for a long time afterwards was very weak. That summer, despite her vows, she found herself pregnant again and in March 1998 she gave birth to a boy after an even more difficult labour than the previous time. The baby has many health problems and needs long-term physiotherapy if he is ever going to be able to walk. Her husband was forced to stop working after laws against unlicensed currency dealers were passed and has become a watchman in the bank where his father holds a senior position. As a result they have a much reduced income. Furthermore, despite the separate flats Jahongul and her husband do not really live apart from her parents-in-law so that Jahongul spends most of her waking time in their flat, serving her mother-in-law. Jahongul’s husband and marital family are autocratic. Although, she lives only a few miles away from her family she is rarely permitted to visit them and never to stay overnight.

When I last saw Nahdiya in spring 1999 she told me she deeply regretted both her choices of son-in-law, saying that neither of them were any good and that she would not marry her third daughter to a Tajik. She will go to university first and only afterwards will they look for a husband for her. Nahdiya said that Tahmina’s husband is incapable of earning any money, makes no financial contribution to the household, and is no help at all in looking after his child. Jahongul’s husband brings home very little money, barely enough to pay for their son’s therapy, and in addition beats her and keeps her from visiting her family. Certainly the one time I saw Jahongul after her marriage she looked terrible but we had no chance to speak privately so I could not find out exactly what the matter was.

It seems that her mother’s having chosen her husband for her has not protected Jahongul from violence, just as having her own flat has not protected her from her mother-in-law. There is no talk of her leaving her husband and returning home or of any attempt by her
family to put a stop to her husband's violence. It is accepted as an unfortunate, but irre-mediable, fact of life.

Jahongul's constantly changing ideas about her future are typical of people who know they have no chance of being able to translate their dreams into action. In Jahongul's case this is only partly owing to Tajik traditions. True, her dreams relating to her choice of husband were unrealisable within that community but those to do with her career choice were not only a reflection of her lack of power to make her own decisions but also the result of the low educational levels in Tajik-language schools, which seem rarely to inculcate any understanding of what it means to study.

During the same period I was interviewing Jahongul in central Dushanbe I was spending time with Sadbarg, a young woman the same age as Jahongul. She and her family live on a hill at the edge of Dushanbe, and their lives and aspirations make an interesting contrast. Sadbarg's family is from a lower social circle than that of Jahongul and they lead an almost peasant lifestyle, having a minuscule piece of land built into the hillside, where they manage to plant vegetables and keep cows, sheep, and goats in an unbelievably tiny space. In the summer one of the sons will take the cows to the mountains, just as they do in Sadbarg's father's home village. Sadbarg herself, having gone to school in central Dushanbe, has had more exposure to the town than her family's life-style would suggest and it is this perhaps that has allowed her to imbue the television programmes she watches with somewhat more immediacy and reality than most rural girls.

When we first met Sadbarg was sixteen, the eldest daughter of a family of ten children, of whom three had died in childhood. Her father is illiterate. He was an alcoholic for many years and perhaps because of this all but two of the children, Sadbarg and her second brother, are somewhat mentally subnormal. Around fifteen years ago their father lost the use of his legs and since then has stopped both drinking and beating his wife, which he used to do a great deal.

Sadbarg is a conscientious, hard working, and lively youngster with lots of ideas of her own. She is not at all happy at home, where she feels very uncomfortable. Her mother is out much of the time, sitting for hours on a bench in front of the school across the street, where she has a job as a cleaner, although her second daughter, a pupil at the school, does most of the actual work. This leaves the housework in Sadbarg's hands. Despite all her labours the house is always filthy and smelly, since most of the children wet their beds every night and their mattresses are used as sitting mats in the daytime.

Sadbarg is doing an apprenticeship at a knitting factory while finishing her last year at secondary school. She is bored with working there and hates the unceasing noise of the machinery. Her only serious aspiration to further education is to become a seamstress. However, her family does not have the money to send her to study this properly. Sadbarg would love to learn languages. She bewails the fact that she knows only Tajik and Russian; she doesn't even know Uzbek. What she would really like, however, if it were at all possible would be to become a nurse.

Sadbarg thinks she is too fat and does not like her face nor her skin. Her brother tells her she is built like a tank and this makes her feel bad. In fact she looks pleasant and
quite bright but what she really wants is to be gorgeous like the heroines of the soap operas and films she adores, but she knows she is not.

Sadbarg hates the fact that her parents are very strict and that she is never allowed to go anywhere except to work. There is so much of the world she would like to see and she is barely allowed to move round her own hometown. However, in the last year she has managed to find ways of going places without her parents' knowledge. They believe the factory workday ends daily at four o'clock and so expect their daughter home around five. In reality, problems acquiring sufficient raw materials have meant that the factory frequently finishes much earlier in the day, and on some days does not open for work at all. Sadbarg and her fellow apprentices never tell this to their parents. Instead every weekday they set off for work and return at the usual time. On those days, increasingly frequent, when they don't have to work or when they finish early the girls take advantage of this to have some fun. They may sneak into the cinema, or go to the market, stroll around the centre looking in shop windows, or go to the park to eat their packed lunches.

However, they have to be careful. They cannot walk freely around but have to stick to areas they know their parents do not frequent. Should any of them find out what their daughters are up to there will be very serious problems. Their parents believe that girls out on their own without strict control are always liable to gravitate towards boys. None of them would believe that these girls are not interested in boys. They just want a little freedom to chat, to exchange views, to learn about life, to feel like adults and not just children, obedient and silent.

Their parents, on the other hand, care about one thing only - their daughters' reputations. The remotest suspicion that their daughters may have had even the most innocent relations with a member of the opposite sex could be damaging. Gossips and spies abound everywhere. So the girls are always frightened they may be caught and their adventures are fraught with risk. But it seems to be a risk that is worthwhile, because they continue to take it, and amazingly enough manage to remain free from discovery.

Sadbarg has no very clear idea what sort of future she would like but she does know that she doesn't want to lead the sort of life she is going to be forced into, that is to marry and have children and never see the world or do anything beyond housework, having children, and perhaps some boring job. She would love to travel - especially to Moscow and to India. She has relatives in the former and thinks it would be interesting to see it. She has learned about India from its musical films, which she loves. She would like television programming to consist of nothing but Indian films, Latin-American soap operas, and concerts of Tajik music and dancing. She doesn't see the point of most Russian programmes, especially things like the news, political commentary and so on. Best of all she loves the Mexican soap opera Wild Rosa. She has occasionally tried to watch the American soap, Santa Barbara, but finds it too complicated and difficult to follow. If she had a choice about how to live her life she would like to live like Rosa did, once she discovered her rich mother.

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3 Rosa is the only mestiza, and therefore poor person, in a cast of blondes. She acquires wealth at the end of the series through finding her 'real' (blond) mother.
Sadbarg wishes she were a boy. If she were a boy she could go anywhere she wanted and stay out all night and no-one would say anything, but a girl has to be home by five o'clock. Even before the war she had to. Parents are afraid that if girls go anywhere they will do bad things with boys, but that is not what Sadbarg is interested in. She just wants to see new places. Her father has been to many Soviet cities but he never took her mother with her. Therefore, Sadbarg knows that married women don't get to go anywhere and that she will never be allowed to go anywhere\(^4\). If she were a boy and had the money she could go to Moscow, but as a girl she cannot. Her parents would never allow her. She doesn't want to get married before she sees Moscow but she believes her parents would throw her out if they heard her say that, or at least give her a lot of grief.

Sadbarg doesn't know whether she wants to marry or not. She will just accept her fate. If no-one asks for her hand then she won't marry, if someone does she will, and that is that. She does not want to choose for herself, but wants her parents to do so in case her husband throws her out and she has nowhere to go. If she chooses for herself she believes that her parents won't take her back if anything happens. But if they choose for her and something goes wrong she will say - 'you see it's all your fault for choosing the wrong man. It's not my fault.' However, she says, if he beats her she will just accept it and not do or say anything. That is the rule in Tajikistan. A wife must obey her husband no matter what and can't tell him what to do. Husbands do not have to obey wives and it is bad that there is no equality in this. However, Sadbarg is not sure that there is any way this can be changed as it is just how things are done here. Nevertheless, when her mother said that whether Sadbarg likes it or not she will marry her off since if she doesn't people will say 'that girl is no good', Sadbarg retorted - 'let them say it. Just see if I care!'

When I left Tajikistan in summer 1995 Sadbarg had just left school. In the event she never got to study anything, but instead later that summer was married off to a distant cousin, a schoolteacher. He is an orphan and lives alone with his younger brother and sisters. Sadbarg is the oldest woman and so she is in charge of the household. She likes this very much. She is able to take most decisions herself so she can order the house as she likes and it is cleaner and the family a great deal more pleasant than her own family. In autumn of the following year Sadbarg gave birth to a healthy baby girl. When I next saw her, a few months later, she looked happy. She was very proud of her beautiful daughter whom she had dressed in the prettiest clothes she could find. She had lost her puppy fat and was looking beautiful herself too. A couple of years later she had a second child.

The soap operas and films Sadbarg is so fond of have made it possible for her to dream of worlds beyond her own ken but not to imagine them having any relation to her own life. She knows that breaking away from her parents' way of life will be beyond her capacities and

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\(^4\) This is not true for all Tajik women. Jahongul's father, for instance, took Nahdiya and the young Tahmina on holiday to Leningrad once and, had he lived, they would probably all have travelled outside Tajikistan. Tillo, Sadbarg's near neighbour, travelled abroad for business (cf. chapter 4).
even wishes. In any case the way of life represented by Rosa is too far away from conceivable experience.

From her very unpromising beginnings Sadbarg seems to have had a lucky break with her marriage and to have improved her life by it. However, she is no nearer getting her wish to travel and see the world. I have not had a chance to ask her how she feels about this but in all likelihood she will now be more concerned about her children’s future than about her own personal wishes.

Jahongul’s fate has been very different. All her worst dreams have been realised and more. She is married to a man who does not earn enough to support her properly. He mistreats her, but even so her family has not been able to help her. Living separately from her parents-in-law allows her husband to beat her without interference from his parents while still placing her in a position of servant to her marital family. Into the bargain her son is an invalid who may never walk properly.

To both Sadbarg and Jahongul the lifestyles portrayed in the soap operas seem light years away. They are not from that segment of society that might be likely to travel abroad or who come into contact with the richer members of Tajik society and they can only marvel, but not relate to the characters depicted.

The stories of these two young women illustrate very poignantly some of the principle issues involved for young people in Tajikistan and how difficult it is to escape the narrow confines within which they are forced to live. For all their desires for a different fate from that of their sisters and friends both Jahongul and Sadbarg have ended up in very much the same way as them. The strong similarity in the way the two girls talked about their reasons for not wanting to marry for love reflects a discourse on domestic violence among younger married couples that is quite common, in Dushanbe at least. The suggestion is that since the civil war all the decent young men are either dead or have left Tajikistan, so that girls are forced to put up with the dregs. I have never heard it suggested that these same young men might have behaved very differently had they not been subjected to the violence of war.

Jahongul sees that Russian girls have a great deal more freedom than she does, that they can have boyfriends, for instance. However, this freedom brings with it responsibilities. In the first place, responsibility for oneself. When one has to run one’s own life things get more difficult. It might be that one would not be able to find a husband at all. So perhaps it is preferable to allow parents to take responsibility. Neither Jahongul and Sadbarg want to

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5 The type of influences that the soap operas can have on the more sophisticated of Central Asian youth is described in Kuehnast’s article on Kyrgyzstan (1998). Her main protagonist fancies herself as a writer of soap operas and likes to see herself as resembling the most glamorous of the business women portrayed in the advertisements coming to them from Moscow. In Tajikistan, as in Kyrgyzstan soap operas [provide the youth] with a set of images of the world beyond the former Soviet Union, a set of images they sometimes [mistake] for reality. (Kuehnast 1998: 645). However, in Tajikistan the uneducated youth with whom the present book deals are unable to appreciate the favourite soap operas of the Kyrgyz, and for that matter of the Russians and other European members of the CIS, partly because their Russian is so poor. As Sadbarg says, the American Santa Barbara is too complicated for her to understand. The only Tajiks I ever saw watching it on a regular basis were academics. Tajik girls can usually only contend with the relatively simplistic Latin-American soaps. At the same time the Tajik girls of the social background I deal with in this book find themselves too far away culturally to be able to relate in the same way to these images as the Kyrgyz woman described by Kuehnast.
accept the responsibility for choosing their own husbands. If their parents do this they believe it will absolve them if things go wrong. It is not their job to do anything about it. This is what things are like and it is not up to them to put them right. That is someone else’s responsibility. On the other hand what steps could they take and remain within the boundaries of Tajik society? The only feasible way would be to have a powerful adult male relative who could have a serious talk with their parents-in-law, as Ruzikhol’s sister-in-law’s father did (cf. chapter 7).

If their men folk do not support them, or if they have no-one else to do so in their stead the only other recourse they have is to return to their parents. Jahongul knows how hard her mother’s life already is without landing her with not only herself but also her invalid son to cope with. Where on earth would she get the money to support them? It is highly unlikely that Jahongul’s husband’s family would make any contribution should she leave him.

But Nahdiya is also in a very difficult position. She does not know what else she could have done to make her daughters’ lives better. Despite her distress over the poor state of the traditionally contracted marriages of her eldest two daughters, she continues to uphold the customary way of life. Despite her wish to find a different sort of man for her youngest daughter she does not permit the latter to abandon any of the traditions.

On the other hand, what options does she have? Living in Tajikistan, a different lifestyle is simply not open to her nor can she begin to imagine such a thing. No way of finding husbands for them that is sanctioned by Tajik society would necessarily have improved things. Nahdiya could not possibly know if any of the other offers she had for her daughters would have turned out better. If they were to divorce it is highly likely that things would only get worse. In the absence of a husband or brother of her own who could put pressure on her daughters’ parents-in-law there is nothing much she can do. Her sons are too young to be taken seriously. Thus, even as head of the family, Nahdiya’s hands are tied.

It is clear from the stories of Sadbarg and Jahongul that the performance they give in front of their parents masks a great deal that they were willing to reveal to me. Sadbarg’s parents have no idea she goes out with her friends after school to the cinema or bazaar. They have no idea how much she would like to travel. Because she thinks this oversteps the boundaries of feminine gender norms in her social circle she feels she must conceal it. Tajik girls are simply not supposed to express desires. To show they even have them could be construed as a threat to parental authority. No wonder these girls prefer to keep quiet in front of their families. Nahdiya certainly had no idea of all the thoughts going through Jahongul’s head during her last year in high school. The outward show, the mask, she put on for her mother was to get on with the housework and not say much of anything.

The narrow range of performances permitted to these women allows society to maintain the status quo. Unless they decide to vary their performances they will not be able to change things in their favour. However, as Butler suggests (1997b: 27-30) making variations significant enough to make a perceptible change in their lives would mean taking the risk of falling outside the boundaries of acceptability. It is a risk that at any rate Jahongul, Sadbarg, and Nahdiya have not yet decided is worth facing. But there are others who believe that they can manoeuvre cleverly enough through the minefields in such a way that their variations become acceptable.
The Will of Youth

If young people have to choose between having their own way and remaining within their families they would have to choose the latter. There is nowhere for them to go if they leave home nor any way of getting financial or other support. Today there are fewer options than ever open to most people, especially to young women. It is prohibitively expensive to register with an institute of higher or even further education and students can no longer live on the minuscule government grants. Furthermore, a diploma is no longer in most cases a passport to a good job, indeed there are few jobs of any kind available, most do not pay even the most basic living wage. It is very difficult to land one without family connections, and even to keep it once one has landed it. When it comes to lay-offs the first to go are those not related to their bosses.

It would be very hard to find a family who would accept an outcast from another family as a spouse for one of their children. Shahzoda, whose story was told in chapter 5, could never have survived without her aunt’s support, without which she could not have married her friend. The increasing numbers of street children are a scary reminder of what can happen to young people without a family.

Friendship is no alternative to family backing because what is needed first and foremost is not moral but material aid. Moral support on its own is not much use when what is needed is a roof over one’s head and food in one’s stomach. Moreover, the personal sympathy of close friends does not weigh much when set against the (dis)approval of the community as a whole.

In any case society is organised in such a way that close relationships are supposed to remain within the family. It is considered treachery to betray family secrets to an outsider. Since it is the family that suffers if secrets become public, trust is unlikely between mere friends, although it seems to be considerably stronger between women than men.

Sadbarg, for instance, could trust her girlfriends not to give her excursions round town away, since they would have been hard put to do this without giving themselves away too. The same goes for Safarmo and her friends whom she meets at night (cf. chapter 4). Perhaps trust between women works best when they are mutually dependent on each others’ silence, since even women friends seem to be careful not to tell each other real family secrets. They seem to feel it easier to tell an outsider such as myself, both because they think my Russianised cultural background means I will not be shocked by their revelations and because I have nothing apparently to gain by betraying them. Such trust is rare between friends.

On the other hand it is difficult to see much of it within the family either, since people seem wary of confiding in relatives. Like Jahongul and Tahmina, sisters may be good friends as children but very often they will see each other relatively little after marriage. Rustam never confided in Kurbon or his sisters that he continued his relationship with Zhenia after his marriage and had remained in touch with her after her departure from Tajikistan. When people have a real and potentially seriously shaming secret it is far too dangerous to tell anyone. Ilimo, for instance, could not possibly tell her mother or sisters about her feared violation (cf. chapter 7). Anything shaming could endanger the reputation of the entire family. This is especially important for younger people because their chance of making a good marriage depends on the reputation of their siblings (cf. Monogarova 1982: I, 90) so that a
Control and Subversion

potentially damaging secret told to one of them is likely not to be safe (cf. Giovannini 1987: 68). Thus, discourse pits all siblings against each other, not just brothers against sisters.

It is hardly surprising then that close friendship seems rare in Tajikistan. The great majority of the men and women I interviewed claimed to have few, if any, real friends and only one or two people had anyone they could talk to about private or intimate matters. When Rustam was younger he had had three close friends, all of whom had disappeared from his life long before I met him. One or two highly educated women I know in Dushanbe have close friends from their school days in whom they confide, but this is exceptional. Women often lose touch with their school friends on marriage.

Moreover, it can be difficult for women to have the chance to spend time alone with their friends, as there are almost always intrusions. It is necessary to make great efforts to maintain privacy. Safarmo's group of women friends, described in chapter 4, is quite unusual in this respect and I never heard of anyone else who laid such stress on friendship. Perhaps this is so important for Safarmo because she has no adult family members of either sex left since the war. Men and boys frequently go round in groups but it is unclear how close they really are to one another. From what I have seen they do not trust each other with secrets.

Thus, for most people there is no one to turn to outside the family. At least within it they receive some level of support, even if mostly material and contingent upon correct behaviour. The vast majority of Tajiks are largely dependent, both morally and materially, on their family structures so that those young people who are serious about making their own life decisions must try to negotiate with their families to find a solution acceptable to all parties.

As was mentioned in chapter 5, in some circumstances the lack of a family member may permit young people partially to usurp their role. Thus, the death of one parent and the absence of another at the war front enabled Naziramo and Karomat both to develop their will power and to exert it in such a way as to make a positive contribution to their own futures, without alienating their families or sacrificing their images as good Tajik women. Ahmed is able to stand up to his divorced mother, as he almost certainly would not have been able to had his father still been around (cf. chapter 5). It does seem that it is considerably easier for a young person to develop will power and be able to use it within an incomplete family structure where, at least notionally, s/he can move up a notch or so on the generational scale. This will have the effect of widening the boundaries of gender performance to encompass the more liberal ones normally permissible only to those of an older age group.

When Tillo married her second husband she left her eldest daughter, Mamlakat, at home to be raised by her own mother. Mamlakat lived with her grandmother until the latter's death in 1995, after which she made her home with one of Tillo's brothers. In 1998, when she was twenty, a cousin made an offer of marriage for her. Her uncle was delighted at the chance of getting her off his hands and immediately accepted. Mamlakat, however, was having none of this. Not only did she dislike this cousin, she already had someone in mind she very much wanted to marry. She fled to her mother's house and told her she was in love with a boy from the neighbourhood and would not marry anyone else as long as he remained single. Tillo thinks it is highly unlikely that this boy's parents will offer for her daughter. However, she has agreed not to try to force her to marry her cousin. They will wait and see what other offers she gets.
Meanwhile, Mamlakat wants to do what she can to further her own cause, but is terrified lest her 'friend' think she is too forward. Although they have only spoken five times in their three years of acquaintance this young man lives at the end of her mother's courtyard and they spend long hours gazing at each other from a distance. Occasionally, the boy whistles a summons to a meeting across the yard but Mamlakat doesn't dare go. She wants to let him know how she feels but she doesn't know how to, or even if this would be wise. For a while after Mamlakat and he became acquainted he dated a more courageous girl but this is over now. Mamlakat is at a loss to know what to do for the best. She knows she must be very careful. If he thinks she is a 'bad' girl he will never marry her. She sits in her room day after day asking herself, 'What shall I do? What shall I do?'

Having been brought up by her grandmother Mamlakat may well feel herself almost part of her mother's and her uncle's generation. For this reason perhaps she feels more able to assert herself in opposition. She knows that her uncle and her mother do not have anything to do with each other so that once she is at her mother's place he can no longer put pressure on her. Furthermore, Mamlakat has heard all about her mother's 'wicked' behaviour from her uncle, which makes her feel more able to stand up to her mother. Mamlakat is noticeably more confident in her behaviour than her younger sister, who has lived all her life with Tillo.

At the same time Mamlakat's fear of over-treading that fine line between good and bad behaviour prevented her from being able to take any positive action in regard to her friend. He is from a different locality from Mamlakat's family and she fears that his parents will choose a wife from their own background. It will only be if he really cares for her that he will fight to have his own way but will he do this if Mamlakat does not even go to meet him? On the other hand, what will he think of her if she does? This whole situation is fraught with difficulties for her. She has no one to advise her. She tried to befriend some of his female relatives but she says they saw what she was after and refused to support her.

The contrast between the attitudes and aspirations of twenty-year-old Mamlakat, and her mother at age seventeen (cf. chapter 4) is striking and illustrative of the contrast between complete and incomplete families, although no doubt the social changes of the last twenty-five years also contributed to the dissimilarities. Mamlakat's defiance of her uncle is also markedly different from Tahmina's and Rustam's incapacity to stand up to their families. It is, of course, easier to defy an uncle, especially when, like Mamlakat, she has been brought up practically as a sister to him, than it is to defy a parent. Moreover, as always, practical considerations play a large role. Had Mamlakat not had her mother's house to escape to her story no doubt would have been very different.

Fotima comes from a very conservative southern village from which no girl had ever been allowed to go to continue her education beyond the local school. From a very young age Fotima felt herself different from the other girls. As a teenager she even managed to go around without a headscarf, somehow persisting in the face of her father's wrath. All her life she had been a rebel, hungering for a different way of life from what she had seen at home. She was excellent at her studies and with great perseverance was able to persuade her mother that above all she wanted to go to university. Although her father was completely opposed Fotima did manage to get her
own way and to study Russian literature at university and later on computers and English. She now works for one of the UN organisations in Dushanbe and has travelled abroad - both to Europe and the United States. Through her work she has developed friendships within the ex-pat community, which have given her a very different outlook on life from that of her friends and relatives.

Fotima is still unmarried. Tajik men are wary of her and mock her, as she does not behave at all as they expect Tajik girls to, and she has not been able to find anyone whom she feels comfortable with, although she thinks she would like to be married. She would certainly marry if only she could find someone with whom she would be happy, with whom she thought she had a chance of forming a real partnership, not like the relationship her Tajik women friends have with their husbands. Fotima's rebellion helped break up her family, and her parents are now divorced. Rather than reproaching her daughter because of this her mother feels much happier that she no longer has to live with her tyrannical husband. Fotima's family has long given up on trying to subject her to the usual rules for unmarried Tajik women and she is allowed to do whatever she likes. However, her younger sister, although now also a student, is carefully supervised and expected to conform.

When Gulchehra was a baby her father became very ill and remained an invalid for the rest of his life. Her mother spent most of her working life in the silk factory in Dushanbe in order to support them. Although virtually illiterate herself she decided it was vital to give her five daughters a good education and most of them have gone on to post-graduate studies. Her eldest daughter is now a historian at the university. Despite their educational levels Gulchehra's mother still considered it her duty to find husbands for her daughters and she married off the first four. Gulchehra, however, has managed to evade this. When I first met the family she was thirty-nine years old. When she was twenty-five her mother had insisted it was time for her to marry but she had refused. She said she intended to get her master's degree before she would marry and that she wanted to do this not in Dushanbe but Moscow. She and her mother had a long-drawn out battle over whether or not she should marry first, her mother insisting that it would shame the family should she not do so. But Gulchehra managed to gain a scholarship to study in Moscow and left before a husband could be found for her. She still lives there and she has managed to draw her master's degree out over so many years that she has almost become a fixture. At nearly forty the likelihood of her ever marrying is pretty slim, although her mother did not entirely lose hope that after her defence she would be able to find her a husband in Tajikistan. However, before this could happen she had a heart attack and died, leaving Gulchehra still in Moscow and undecided whether ever to return to her homeland.

Gulchehra claims to be uninterested in marriage. Although Fotima still hopes to marry some day her expectations of men are probably too high to be met in Tajikistan and Tajik men regard her with suspicion and not a little alarm. She would rather not marry at all than do so unhappily. She is determined not to suffer the same fate as her girlfriends and in her case has been able to do something about it.
Coming from an even less promising background than Jahongul and Sadbarg, through her own talents, hard work and persistence Fotima had been able to do what for these other two women had remained completely at the level of dreams. The fact that she had her mother's support made it possible for her to get her own way. Had Rustam had this he most probably could also have prevailed. Even though Fotima's father actually carried out what Malik had only threatened the family seem to have survived pretty well.

Luckily for Fotima she was just old enough to have already been at university before the break-up of the Soviet Union, when free entrance and student grants made it possible to be largely financially independent during her study time. She was also just young enough to have graduated at a point where she could get a job with the UN and thus gain total financial and material independence, something Rustam had been unable to do at that point in his life.

All Muslim girls are supposed to put marriage and children at the centre of their lives. The pressure on them to become wives and mothers is so great that it is extremely difficult to withstand. Those who want to stand up against it, like Gulchehra and Fotima, need to be extraordinarily strong. It is largely the fact that they have both been able to distance themselves from the closed world of Tajik society that enables them to carry on as they do, openly contravening so many aspects of the accepted performances of feminine gender. No hiding behind gender masks for them.

I have already recounted in chapter 5 how at the age of eighteen Naziramo managed to persuade her father to hold off on marrying her, and subsequently chose her own husband when already in her mid twenties. Naziramo also refuses to assume the usual submissive gender mask in front of her husband, even in public.

_Naziramo's mother died of cancer of the womb after a long illness during which her daughter saw just how terribly people could suffer when they were sick. This experience made her decide to become a doctor when she grew up so she could try to make other people's suffering less horrible. Naziramo never forgot this aim and worked steadily towards it all her schooldays. However, when she graduated she was not able to get accepted immediately at the medical institute and only after working as a nurse's aid for several years did she manage to pass her entrance examination. Naziramo's father helped her as much as he could in this. He is a physics teacher who has encouraged all his daughters to study._

_Long before she left school Naziramo had developed her own way of thinking. She says she considers that anyone without an opinion of their own is not a real person. She can't imagine not having an opinion of her own. Even when she was a child she did._

_She does not pretend to be otherwise, even in front of her husband. He claims to admire this in her and occasionally jokes that she should leave him the chance to have just one teeny weeny opinion of his own sometimes._

_Naziramo and her husband basically have the same outlook on life, she says. The one thing they were not in agreement about was when to have children. He very much wanted to start a family immediately after the wedding, because he found it depressing to live in a house without children. Although she would have preferred to finish studying first, in the end Naziramo agreed and became pregnant within a few months of marrying. They now have two little girls and Naziramo is working as a_
Control and Subversion

paediatrician. However, even though she is a doctor Naziramo has never used contraception. After her second daughter was born she had an abortion but even that did not persuade her of the advisability of using birth control. In the last year she has not conceived although has not tried to prevent it. She thinks her abortion may have something to do with this. One of the reasons, she says, that she does not use contraception is that she does not want to have an IUD. When I pointed out that there are other methods available she did not really seem to know about them.

Again, her lack of a mother was no doubt a major factor in Naziramo’s being able to develop self-determination as a child. The contrast between her steady working towards her goal and Jahongul’s dreamlike musings on her future is very marked. This may have to do with the fact that Naziramo’s father, being educated, was able to encourage her to study in a more realistic manner than the uneducated Nahdiya could do for Jahongul and Naziramo may also have attended a better school. Once again the timing is important. Like Fotima Naziramo also started her studies during Soviet times when it was possible to get accepted to tertiary education without paying several year’s of an average person’s salary in entrance fees. It is also possible that the contrast here seems greater because Naziramo’s life is being viewed in retrospect. It may be that catching her at age sixteen she would have exhibited at least some of the same vacillations. The fact that Naziramo is older and educated, and that her mother-in-law is far away, enables her to develop a position of strength in relation to her husband. But he is also unusual in that his wife’s lack of submission to him does not appear to bother him. This is probably made easier because other than in this respect Naziramo does not try to step outside local customs.

The stories in this book illustrate the fact that underneath the surface uniformity there is real room for difference in Tajik society. The masks of conformity conceal many aberrations, albeit mostly not very serious ones. The wide range of young people’s capacities to stand up to their families appears to be due to the relative elasticity or rigidity of each particular family situation. What appears to be happening is that, just as in the West, these youngsters give small experimental pushes against the boundaries of parental authority, until they find themselves up against the limits; in Tajikistan, however, the boundaries are usually narrower and less flexible.

In some families, such as that of Rustam, there is very little room at all for manoeuvre. Despite Tahmina and Jahongul’s lack of a father they also do not seem to have much space for this. This may be because in the absence of the usual male controlling figure they have to try hard to prove that they are every bit as well behaved as their contemporaries and to ensure their family does not get a bad reputation. Girls certainly have to be much more careful about appearing to butt their heads against the outer walls than boys since they have more at stake in their gender performances. Nevertheless, where space for action existed, as for Karomat, Naziramo, Mamlakat, Fotima, and Gulchehra, they took as much room as they could and, since they did not overstep the boundaries of parental acceptance, they were able to gain a significant amount of freedom to act, while remaining within the limits of acceptable feminine gender performance. This shows how more flexible the limits are in practice than the discourse would suggest, something Singerman also noted for Cairo (1995: 51).
Twenty-three-year-old Habiba lives in Sayot. She is intelligent and has a pretty face, but her body appears twisted and one of her legs is much shorter than the other. It is clear both to herself and her family that no-one will ever offer for her in marriage. They have taken her to many doctors but they all say they cannot do anything for her. All her contemporaries have long since married and already have children. It is getting harder and harder for her to spend time with them because their experiences are so different now. There are so many things that the married women cannot discuss in front of her. The one dream of Habiba's life is to be just like them. She knows that her family look on her as a nuisance. She is bored all the time, has nothing at all to look forward to, and life seems totally meaningless. She struggles to seem cheerful but most of the time all she wants to do is cry.

Since Habiba cannot marry, the desire to do so has become her unattainable dream. The fact that it is not through any fault of her own that she will not be able to marry, that she has not broken any rules, makes things none the easier for her, nor does it help people to relate to her better. As she gets older she has only greater and greater alienation to look forward to.

Another group of social outcasts is formed by the many women who have been raped since the start of the civil war in 1992. This group also includes women who were taken from their families and forced to cohabit with men from the other side. Most of these women have since been abandoned by these 'husbands' but they are not accepted back in their families as divorcees in the normal way. Since nikoh was never celebrated for them they count as having lived with men outside wedlock, and this has shamed their families. In some of the worst-affected villages there are large numbers of such women. Like Habiba, through no fault of their own, they also face a life without a future.

Infertility is also a serious handicap. A few years ago I was approached by a woman from Sayot whose daughter had been given a hysterectomy, when gynaecological problems arose after she miscarried during her first pregnancy. After this her husband had immediately divorced her and now no-one else would have her. Her mother begged me to find out if there were any way she could be given an artificial womb, so that she could be restored to fertility. This young woman and the many others like her, will also have little option but to live their lives as burdens on their natal families. Their fate is only barely better than that of Habiba. At least, having once been married, their contemporaries can include them in their married-women's conversations.

For once I can see the point of such an institution as the Roman Catholic convent. At least it can serve as an asylum for unmarriageable women, in the absence of alternatives. In fact, it was for just such eventualities that the Qur'an recommended polygyny (cf. Omran 1992: 20). However, Muslim men today consider this to be an institution developed for their benefit, rather than for that of women, and they would never even consider taking one of these social outcasts as a second wife. This is a great pity since, in the circumstances of post-war Tajikistan, some sort of social institution that could provide a place for these women is desperately needed. As it is there is simply nowhere for them to go where they could lead a meaningful life and not be a burden on their families.
There are also unmarried women among the most highly educated, although even they are constantly bombarded with offers from their friends to find them a husband. I have also come across a very small number of unmarried women in their mid twenties from lower social levels who apparently lead reasonably happy lives, but these are all professionals whose lives largely revolve round their work and who either live or spend most of their time, in the towns. I have not had the opportunity to discuss their situations with them so I cannot tell what the reasons for their unmarried state might be nor if they are still hoping to find husbands. I neither know how they are regarded by the community nor what sort of family problems their single state may bring them.

For uneducated village women there really appears to be no real option other than marriage. For this reason we tried to discuss with Habiba’s parents the possibility of her completing her schooling and going on to tertiary education so as to have the chance of getting a job in the town. They agreed it would be the only way she might be able to have some sort of meaningful life but it may not be easy for them to organise this.

Infertility appears to be on the increase in Tajikistan, in part due to greatly increased rates of STD’s. Although in Tajikistan, as in many other places, infertility is frequently on the husband’s side, it is almost always the woman who is blamed and who suffers most from the stigma. One of the main reasons why most families require a new daughter-in-law to become pregnant immediately is to test her fertility.

Women known to be infertile are almost always divorced for this. Until recently it was considered that infertility was always the woman’s fault. Nowadays if a family sends a kelin for tests the doctors usually insist on checking her husband first. If he is found to be infertile his wife’s parents may insist on removing their daughter from him. This was, for instance, the reason why Zebo’s sister-in-law, Mokhru was divorced from her first husband. Although the stigma of infertility may not be as great for a man he will still suffer from it. In a culture such as that of Tajikistan where fertility is one of the main ways of proving manhood, children are as important to masculine gender identity as to feminine identity. As a woman from a very similar culture explained: ‘A man wants children to be proud, to say he has children, to feel he is a man. He sees that his friends have children, so he wants [them], too. It’s like an envy in each man that he wants to have children and a family. It makes him feel complete; exactly like the woman, he feels incomplete without it’ (Inhorn 1996: 62). This attitude is echoed in Tajikistan, by Rashid, for instance, before Tahmina became pregnant (cf. chapter 7).

After her three children all died in infancy Karomat suffered a miscarriage at five months, brought on by manual labour when she was helping dig the ground for the fountain in front of the Dushanbe Opera House. The treatment she received in the hospital damaged her womb and she became infertile. For some years afterwards she tried all the traditional cures she could, including visiting mullahs, and local shrines dedicated to fertility. When none of these worked she turned to modern medicine, but the doctors were also unable to cure her. Realising how very much she wanted a child Khudoydod suggested they adopt. He even said they could pretend she was pregnant, stuffing a cushion under her clothes. They would arrange the adoption and then she could go away to ‘give birth’ and bring the child home with her. In this way no-one
would know the child was not theirs. Karomat, however, would have none of it. If she
could not have her own child then she would not have one at all.

Karomat and Khudoydod lived in his paternal home. His older brother had a home of
his own but it was not nearly as nice nor as large. After they had been married
eighteen years, Karomat's mother-in-law died. Immediately her husband's relatives
started to look enviously at Karomat and her husband living in their great place all
by themselves and to put pressure on Khudoydod to take a second wife, or else to
adopt one of their daughters. However, Khudoydod refused, saying he loved his wife
and needed no-one else. But, after her mother-in-law died Karomat soon got tired of
being on her own much of the time and doing the housework all by herself.

Khudoydod would bring his friends home, and his relatives would come over, and she
would have no-one to help her with all the work. And all the time her husband's
relatives were offering him this young girl or that as a wife. ‘What is life without
children?’ they would hint, ‘what is the point of having this big garden and house
without children?’

While her mother-in-law had been alive Karomat had been fine, despite her childless
state. She was happy with her husband, his relatives didn't bother her and her
mother-in-law was even better to her than her own mother. But after her death her in-
laws' pressure made her more and more unhappy. Finally she got tired of the whole
thing and decided to leave so her husband could remarry.

Once she had made up her mind that was that. Her heart was cold. She wanted
Khudoydod to divorce her so he could marry again and have children. But he
wouldn't agree. He said he loved her and wanted only to be with her and that this was
much more important to him than anything else, including children. He couldn't
understand why she wanted a divorce, and she never told him. He was sure it must be
to marry someone else. He loved her so much and found her so beautiful he could not
believe that other men would not be after her.

It took Karomat more than one and a half years of working on him before he finally
agreed to a divorce. They split up and she returned to live with her parents.

Khudoydod eventually remarried but Karomat never looked at another man, saying
that once a woman had loved one man she could not see how she could ever have
anything to do with another.

Khudoydod chose for his second wife a woman who had been divorced after ten years
of marriage without a single pregnancy. With Khudoydod she also did not become
pregnant, so she agreed to adopt a daughter. Later she insisted on blaming her lack
of children on Khudoydod. He became incensed and said that he had had children by
Karomat but they simply had not lived. Furthermore, he told her he had additional
proof that the problem was on her side. He introduced her to his son by a Russian
woman with whom he had had a relationship. Later, when this woman decided to
emigrate to Russia Khudoydod took the child into his home and insisted his wife bring
him up as their own.
Control and Subversion

In Karomat’s old age her lack of children became a scourge to her because it meant that she had little left to live for and she would leave no trace of herself behind on earth after her death.

Karomat’s husband was clearly an unusual man. It is impossible to know how much his apparently relaxed attitude to producing his own progeny came from his love for Karomat, which was so strong he did not feel the need of anything else to make him happy. I cannot help wondering about his strange second marriage. Was it that Karomat’s problems had made him sympathetic to a woman whom perhaps no one else would ever have offered for? Or could it have simply been that coincidentally he just happened to fall in love with an infertile woman?

Problems - Suicide

When problems become very bad and there is no way out, suicide is a not uncommon response. No figures are available but the authorities are very worried about the incidence of this in Tajikistan. Until perestroika suicide was never mentioned in public but in the late 1980’s under glasnost’ newspapers were permitted to publish accounts of suicides (cf. Khushkadamova 1993). The high incidence that was hereby revealed shocked the public. In an effort to dissuade people from such actions Dushanbe television dramatised the stories of women who immolated themselves. However, not surprisingly this does not seem to have made much difference, since it did nothing at all to tackle the underlying social problems. Today it is still not uncommon for a girl forced against her will to abandon the man she loves in favour of someone of her parents’ choosing, to prefer to kill herself. In fact young people of both sexes whose parents will not listen to them may attempt suicide, perhaps hoping to be rescued before they have gone too far, but the methods they choose may not always make it possible to save them.

The two favourite methods are self-immolation - pouring petrol over oneself and then setting light to it - and drinking vinegar essence (Polyakov 1992: 54). This last can seriously damage the liver so that the person dies a very slow and painful death.

Women in situations of acute domestic abuse may also find suicide their only escape. There are no shelters, nor anywhere else that women in Tajikistan can turn to if they cannot be taken in by their natal family.

Lola and her husband live on their own. Every night now her husband comes home late and very stoned. As soon as he gets in the door he starts shouting for her. He does not sleep much at all, instead keeping her up all night shouting and swearing at her, and forcing her to have sex with him. He scarcely gives her the chance to sleep either so she has had to take to sleeping in the daytime in order to be able to stay awake all night. He terrifies her but she doesn’t know how to protect herself from him. He rapes her over and over but still does not seem to be able to satisfy himself. She is all torn up inside, especially her anus. One night he even bound her breasts tightly

See Harris (1998a) for a fuller account of her life.

And not only in Tajikistan. Suicide is on the rise in other Central Asian republics also, as Kathleen Kuehnast points out for Kyrgyzstan (1998: 650).
together with cloth and raped her between them, all the while threatening her with a knife. Soon after the violence started she ran home to her parents to hide from him. However, they insisted on sending her back, telling her she no longer belonged at home with them. It was shaming to them to have her return now she was married. In the end Lola could bear it no more and drowned herself.

But men also commit suicide when life seems to have gone against them. Indeed today male suicide rates are said to be rising faster than female ones.

Ulhon and Abdul married for love against the wishes of both their families. Because they had nowhere else to go they were forced to move in with his parents. His mother was furious about his defiance and never stopped calling her daughter-in-law all the bad names she could think of, including whore. She made her do much more work than her other kelsis.

One day when Ulhon was nearly nine months pregnant and her back was aching she got up late. Her mother-in-law started cursing her out. Abdul shouted at his mother to stop saying such things to his wife who was about to bear his future son. His mother said this son would not be legitimate, as Abdul's marriage could not be valid without his parents' consent. When his mother continued to swear at Ulhon, Abdul went into the yard, took some of the petrol from his motorbike, poured it over himself, and set it alight.

When Ulhon found him he was whirling round the yard, engulfed in flames and screaming with pain. She threw herself on him to try either to put out the flames or to die with him. The two of them lost consciousness. Before regaining it Ulhon gave birth to a normal baby boy. Abdul just lived long enough to see his son once. Ulhon did not die but she was hideously burned.

Having nowhere else to go Ulhon returned to her parents, who treated her very badly, saying she deserved everything she got for having defied them to marry for love. After a lot of thought Ulhon gave her baby up for adoption, as she said she couldn't bear the thought of him growing up looking at her ruined face. Now she has no idea at all what to do with the rest of her life.

Bashram was fired from his job about a year ago after a nasty industrial accident, which caused him to lose an arm. He was not qualified for non-manual work and couldn't get another job. This was all the more difficult as he had no relatives living nearby. The relationship between him and his wife became worse and worse and he suspected she had taken a lover. One evening she came home from work and started

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6 I have to thank Mohiniss Shonazarova for telling me this story. Wife rape is not at all exceptional in Tajikistan today, especially for men on drugs, usually heroin. A number of women have said that their husbands, who later turned out to be heroin addicts, were demanding sex all night long night after night, as if they had a burning need to prove their virility over and over and over. At least, heroin appears to be the cause (cf. note 7, chapter 4).

9 This story was printed in the newspaper Chakhri Gordon in spring 1999. This is a newspaper that specialises in having ordinary Tajiks write in with their own tales. The story was supposedly recounted by Ulhon herself. I wish to thank Mohiniss Shonazarova for drawing my attention to it.
to pack up her possessions and those of their son. She told Bashram she was leaving him and didn’t want to see him again. Since his accident the idea of his even touching her made her queasy so she was planning on divorcing him and remarrying.

For Bashram this was the last straw. With no job, no wife, and no child he felt he had less than nothing to live for. He emptied the medicine cupboard of all the pills he could find and swallowed the lot in one go. The next morning a friend found him unconscious on the floor and rushed him to hospital just in time to save his life. After his release his friends persuaded him to return to his home region where he had family, as they were afraid that if he stayed in the house alone he would try to kill himself again.¹⁰

Women seem to commit suicide because of frustrations in love, the impossibility of escape from ongoing abuse, or more recently the inability to feed themselves and their families. These problems are largely gender specific, stemming from the difficulties women have remedying their situation in view of the constraints on their actions and of the requirement to uphold their family’s normus. In many cases it is precisely because this is so strongly dependent on their daughter’s correct behaviour that such daughters are left with no other solution than suicide, as in the case of Lola.

Male suicides are also related to normus, but somewhat differently. All too often it seems their suicides are caused by shame at their inability to live up to the appropriate masculine gender performances. For instance, Rugh (1985) describes the case of an Egyptian man in Cairo who felt his masculinity under siege when he was unable to hold down a job, and his wife, against his wishes, went out to work as a cleaner. Unable to control his wife or fulfil his role as breadwinner, he also feared she was committing the ultimate sin of cuckolding him with her employer. His response was to pour kerosene over himself and burn himself to death (Rugh 1985: 280).

Bashram’s suicide appears not just to be related to the despair of having lost his arm, his job, his wife, and his child but also to the fact that these were precisely the elements that made him a man. Perhaps too Abdul’s suicide was related to the constant humiliations his mother was subjecting him to that made him feel that he was not a ‘real man’, as well as the fact that he was not man enough to be able to take his wife away from that horrible environment and provide for her elsewhere. In other words, while women commit suicide when they have no way out of an unbearable family situation, for men the stripping away of their appropriate gender masks, and the resulting destruction of their masculine image, may in itself be sufficient to impel them to take such a step.

The Performance of Masculinity

The stories related above demonstrate that it is not just feminine gender that is problematic in performance. The correct performance of masculine gender may also be complicated and onerous.

¹⁰This story was told me by Bahodur Toshmatov, one of a group of friends who spent the night after Bashram’s release from hospital trying to cheer him up and to persuade him to focus on the good things of life.
In the past decade or so there has been a wave of studies of masculinity, particularly in the English-speaking world. Victor Seidler (1991) recounts the difficulties of 'living up to masculinity' in Britain, and how he felt compelled to spend much of his adolescence doing all he could to avoid letting himself down and being labelled a 'sissy' or a 'weed'.

'I had to learn to please and ingratiate and to suppress my own feelings and responses, my own anger and frustration, so that I was liked by the others... even if this meant sacrificing a sense of myself.' (Seidler 1991: 17).

There is no reason to suppose that men in other cultures find it any easier to live up to the identities they have thrust upon them. In Tajikistan the contradiction between the image of the male as dominant and controlling and the subjugation of young men to their fathers and even grandfathers must make for its own special problems. The image of man as virile provider is also not unproblematic in the transition period with its extremely high levels of unemployment and the resulting necessity to keep one's family small. The apparent rise in domestic violence among younger couples is doubtless not unconnected with the struggles of young men to portray their masculine gender in the face of great odds. Not unsurprisingly men's need to dominate their wives, not necessarily through physical violence, appears to increase in direct proportion with the decrease in other ways of displaying masculinity, as in the cases of Fayziddin and Hafizullo (cf. chapter 7). Few men feel as comfortable with their masculinity as Naziramo's husband, Alijon, apparently does (cf. chapter 5) or as Umed, so that it does not worry them to think of their wives as lacking in submission.

Umed is a 30-year-old English teacher who works for an American international NGO in Dushanbe. He is very sweet and not at all assertive in any obvious way, and we get on very well. However, it is clear that he is at times uncomfortable with the feminist stance of some of the Western women he works with. One day I asked him what it was that upset him. He told me that in Tajikistan all women were married and all wives obeyed their husbands. 'Always?' I asked. 'Always.' Gently I started to probe into his relationship with his own wife. I asked what exactly he would order her to do, whether he would ever allow her to make decisions relating to the family, and what happened when she wanted to do something. Did she always have to get his permission? These questions got Umed thinking and eventually a long discussion started between us on this subject. During the course of this it came out that Umed's wife made virtually all the decisions to do with the home. She would tell Umed what she needed him to buy, and ask him to carry out repairs or to help her with the children. She also made most minor decisions about the latter without even consulting Umed, since his job took him away from home for long periods at a time. At the end of our discussion I asked Umed whether he still thought that all Tajik wives obeyed their husbands. He smiled at me and said, 'no, no, you have convinced me that this is

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Control and Subversion

not true. I thought she obeyed me, but it turns out that things are quite different and I actually obey her.'

Is the mere idea of the mask so overwhelming that Umed sees it even when it is not there? Or is it not rather that at first he was giving me the standard reply, telling me what everyone seems to have tacitly agreed to pretend, a pretence that has been so powerful that Umed had come to believe it and did not usually think beyond it? Then, on my digging deeper he laid out for me the private relationship rarely seen by people outside the family and which therefore does not have to correspond with the 'stock character' gender performances. In public it is important to maintain the masks in place so that the reality will not reflect negatively on masculine gender performance, that is as long as everyone agrees to accept them and nothing occurs to spoil this image, of course. However, if the reality were to become known outside the family this could be a cause of ayb. Rustam, for instance, gets away with not controlling Jumbul precisely because this is only known inside the family (cf. chapter 5). Were it to be known to others this could cause difficulties.

Decades of defending their ways of life against Russo-Soviet onslaughts have left Tajiks very aware that the performance of gender is culture specific. They know, for instance, that ayb and nomus are not important to Russians in the same way they are to them. Both Tajiks and Russians are very ready with remarks about the difference in their respective female gender performances. Jahongul, for example, clearly has a good idea of the different way Russian girls are allowed to behave.

However, there is much less comment on male gender performance. What there is tends to focus on what both sides see as the greater equality between Russian men and women, and between members of different generations. This is a result of the fact that Russian men do not define their masculinity through the same levels of strict control over family members as Tajik men do.

The following story shows that Tajik men are not only aware of such cultural differences in gender performance, they are consciously able to move between what they see as acceptable performances of Russian masculinity and performances of Tajik masculinity. In other words, they have widened their range of gender masks to include both these types.

Sayara's husband Eshmurod had been absent in Russia for a very long time and she was fed up, so she decided to go and fetch him back. After a long and tiring journey she arrived at the address he had given her and knocked on the door. A Russian woman opened it. 'Who are you?', she asked, 'and what do you want?' Sayara said she was looking for Eshmurod. 'Why do you want him?', was the response. 'I am his wife', said Sayara. The Russian woman looked at her and said. 'But I am his wife'. Just then Eshmurod came out to see what was going on. When he saw Sayara he invited her in and introduced her to the Russian woman, Tanya, as his other wife. Sayara was not pleased but she knew there was little she could do about it. She went in and agreed to stay with them for a few days. In his turn Eshmurod agreed to return to Tajikistan with her for a visit.

Meanwhile, Tanya was getting dinner in the kitchen. She called to Eshmurod and asked him to help her cook and to lay the table. Sayara watched in amazement as her husband, whom in all their years of marriage she had never seen lift a hand in the
Eshmurod seems to have been trying to live up to Tanya’s expectations of him, clearly very different from what Sayara’s had previously been. Eshmurod’s Tajik men friends in Russia, who might see him in this new persona are likely to be doing the same for their Russian wives so they will not regard his behaviour as the aberration they might otherwise have seen it as. Therefore, they would not pressure Eshmurod into the same sort of masculine gender performances as they would if he did this in Tajikistan. Furthermore, the couple are doubtless living in Tanya’s flat, and even Eshmurod’s legal right to live in that town will be dependent on Tanya’s allowing him to register at her address. Here it is the women who have the advantage. It is their town and their Tajik husbands are dependent on their wives’ positions, a situation very different from what most of them will have experienced back home. When Tajik men married Russian wives in earlier times this often happened while they were away from home, on army service in Russia, for instance. They would then bring their wives back with them, hoping they would be accepted by their families. These men almost invariably insisted on living in Tajikistan. In that case the onus was on the women to adapt and conform to Tajik feminine gender performances, especially if they lived in communities with a preponderance of Tajiks. Those living in Russian-dominated Dushanbe were not expected to take on Tajik identity quite so strongly (Tett 1995: 168).

The Story of Rustam Continued, or Another Way of Expressing Masculinity

In the previous chapter I examined the dynamics of family relationships starting with the story of Rustam. I explained how he spent much of his childhood being punished by his parents and is still repeatedly denigrated by them. Despite this his public image is that of a relaxed masculinity, efficiently and with ease carrying out all the myriad little rituals of a male Tajik’s life, including waiting on his elders, and showing them due respect at public functions. He is someone others turn to for help and support, appearing collected, decisive, and resourceful. In other words, at work he appears highly masculine, something that he is unable to do in front of his father. Nevertheless, behind his mask Rustam is unsure of himself, timid and shy.

For all his need of his father’s approbation Rustam is still able to criticise his behaviour. In the past Malik used on occasion to beat Dilorom, sometimes quite severely. One of

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13 This story was told me by Kalongul Magzumova.
Rustam's earliest memories is watching his father beating his mother and he vowed to be unlike him when he grew up and especially that he would never hit a woman.

After Zhenia left Rustam had little to focus his emotions on, other than his desperate need for his father's approbation, and he increasingly sank into melancholia and depression. He kept going only through instinct and routine. He was excellent at his work and adored by his pupils. In the absence of anything else to interest him he was putting in tremendously long hours in his school workshop and was always willing and ready to help anyone who asked for it.

Meanwhile, internally Rustam was gradually subsiding into a twilight world from which external reality seemed more and more distant. The present was reduced to a primitive series of mechanical actions - getting out of bed in the morning, eating, going to work, coming home, eating again, going to bed at night. The only milestones he could envision in his future would be the marriages of his children. His 'real' life was lived internally, with the 'ghost' of Zhenia ever walking by his side. This 'half-life' was interrupted by a radical change of employment. Rustam's new job is with his uncle's firm where he was hired as assistant buyer. He had been a teacher all his life, never giving a thought to the commercial world, which in any case had never previously existed in Tajikistan. But he could no longer afford to maintain his family on his teacher's wages. Once started in the world of business Rustam found himself fascinated by it. His job is to anticipate what people in Tajikistan will buy in these times of extreme economic hardship. When he goes on buying trips he has to judge which of the goods on offer will sell and which not. Within a short time the goods Rustam was choosing were selling twice or three times better than those the other buyers brought back with them and he was promoted to chief buyer. Nevertheless, his success at work does not compensate for the unhappiness of his private life and however much his uncle praises him, his father does not give him any more approbation than before. This all makes Rustam all the more convinced that his outward competence is just a show and that in reality he is the failure his father proclaims him to be.

At the same time Rustam was enjoying his job, which for the first time in his life brought him into an atmosphere where he was encouraged to think for himself and make his own decisions. During his career as a teacher this had been completely frowned upon. Both lesson plans as well as methodology had been fixed by the Ministry of Education and he had had practically no leeway to develop anything on his own. His parents had done their best to prevent him taking any initiative in his private life.

The new job forced Rustam into situations in which he had to make immediate decisions without the possibility of consulting his boss. He would be far away, without any means of communication with Tajikistan and it would be entirely up to him to decide whether a line of goods would be likely to sell. After some initial trepidation Rustam found himself responding very positively to this challenge. However, as soon as he returned home he would be confronted with his wife, or his father would start belittling him again and doing his best to ensure Rustam did not think his new job entitled him to think any better of himself.
It did not take long before Rustam began to realise how much happier he was away than at home. He started to think he would like to make a life for himself and his children outside Tajikistan altogether. 'To procure joy in life for myself and my children' he wrote in his notebook, 'I need to take them away from here.' However, this dream remains entirely in his head, on much the same level as his dreams of Zhenia. The idea of taking practical steps to realise it terrifies him. In fact, he does not really seem to believe in this dream, any more than Jahongul in hers or Sadbarg in her ability to live like Rosa.

Rustam's insecurities are clearly very different from those of the other men discussed in this chapter, as also from his father's. The latter's beating of his wife and his constant put-downs of his son are added proof of Malik's insecurity in his masculinity. His son, meanwhile, has grown up physically capable and co-ordinated, able to support his entire family materially. He has proved his virility by his fathering of children, and his relationship with Zhenia has left him with no doubts about his abilities to perform well in bed. At work the other men look up to him and he is rather the object of envy than disdain. Indeed the abyss of self-doubt that lurks underneath the surface is so well concealed that they are unimaginable to those who have only seen his public face.

Conclusion

The gender performances of these young men and women are fluid and varying, employed in an attempt to maximise the few advantages they have in situations basically stacked against them. Nevertheless, despite the fact that their personal identities were formed very much through subjugation and dependence, they have proved themselves capable of refusing to be mere victims. Their deliberate masking of their real personalities and the concealing of their agency in order to appear to conform to their parents' and society's demands, while secretly resisting, can be considered more than mere submission to necessity, their manipulation of situations yet another example of the use of those sorts of weapons that are at the disposal of the weak (cf. Scott 1985).

Because they do not conform to the outward performance of gender expected by Tajik society, the dreams and desires of young men and women usually remain as unexpressed fantasies inside their heads, or at the most secretly voiced to their best friends. The downcast eyes and silences of Jahongul, Rustam, and the others, conceal so many fears and hopes that they can never voice, especially those to do with the subject of their future marriage.

The insistence by the Soviet authorities that they had created a viable and wonderful new way of life in which difficulties and social problems were minimalised has meant that Soviet citizens as a whole were taught to regard problems as due to personal failings not to the system (Humphrey 1983: 441). This makes them feel all the more helpless and inadequate when things go wrong. Added to the lack of counselling and social-support groups, this means that people have nobody and nothing to fall back on. Essentially they are out there all alone. Most families' fears of their weaknesses being exposed and exploited makes it very difficult for anyone even to mention a problem outside the family circle. When, as so often is the case, it is the very family that has caused it there is nothing for it but to keep the pain and confusion shut up inside.
The stories narrated here have shown that it is possible for determined young people in certain circumstances to find a modus operandi that allows them to make their own choices without alienating themselves from their families. They reveal that it is very often not those who choose conformity who are rewarded: Naziramo, Fotima, Gulchehra, Javhar - those who made their own choices in life have also been the happiest, while many of the most unhappy are exactly the ones who have conformed.

Rustam’s abandonment of Zhenia has brought him little personal benefit, in exchange for the sacrifice of his happiness. Although not exposed to the sort of physical maltreatment some of the women suffer nor forced to live with an autocratic mother-in-law, the psychological violence his own father inflicts on him is hardly less brutal nor in some ways less painful. Javhar’s sister finds herself married to an alcoholic husband who beats her. Jahongul finds herself in an even worse situation than any she had previously envisaged, unprotected from her husband’s beatings, struggling to make ends meet on very inadequate means, serving her mother-in-law, and with an invalid child into the bargain.

In this chapter I discussed young women’s ideas of marriage and future spouse. In the following one I look at experiences of the marital relation, in particular at love and the sexual relation, and their significance in Tajikistan.