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The Domino Effect of Change

Norah Schloneger

Malala Yousafzai is a household name. Her strong and continuous activism for girl's education has brought her worldwide acknowledgement and fame. However, one of the most pivotal people in the upbringing of Malala, her mother, does not get any acknowledgement. Toor Pekai's generation of women were raised to fulfill their duties to their husbands by being housewives. Throughout the book, she is seen as the most conservative of the family and does not speak out as much as her husband and daughter. Although Malala's mother is supportive of her activism, it is difficult for her to break the ruling of the traditional gender roles in her generation and society. Toor Pekai's development is a testament to Malala's success, ultimately leading her to become a more progressive model in society.

A lot of Toor Pekai and Malala's differences stem from the way they both grew up. Toor Pekai grew up in a very traditional Muslim household with an absent father. Malala writes, "[Toor Pekai's father] would set off early every morning after a breakfast of cornbread and cream, his German pistol strapped under his arm, and spend his days busy with local politics or resolving feuds" (Yousafzai 40). Toor Pekai rarely saw her father, and when she did, it seemed like he didn't care much about what she was doing. On the other hand, Malala's father is one of her biggest role models and fights for her. When one of Malala's uncles got angry that she wasn't covering her face, her father responded with, "She's my daughter. Look after your own affairs" (Yousafzai 66). Malala's father supports her strong beliefs and lets her live her life how she thinks is best. Malala's mother, however, advises her to follow the traditional rules out of fear that they would be judged. She recalls, "My mother used to tell me to hide my face when I spoke to the media because at my age I should be in purdah" (Yousafzai 162). Toor Pekai's scolding results from her desire to always follow those in power, stemming from the traditional gender roles in her society.

Malala continues to see the differences between her and her mother as she grows up. She writes, "[Toor Pekai] disapproves of dancing because she says God would not like it, but she loves to

decorate herself with pretty things, embroidered clothes and golden necklaces and bangles....I get bored going to the bazaar, but I love to dance behind closed doors with my school friends” (Yousafzai 22-23). Malala has grown up consistently challenging the traditional norms placed in front of her, while Toor Pekai follows them because they are all she’s ever known. Toor Pekai is trapped in the traditions of a society that believes men are more capable than women. The contrasts between Toor Pekai and Malala are a result of their upbringing in different generations and the male examples they had in their lives.

Malala’s mother, although very encouraging of her daughter, is dictated by traditional gender roles in her society. When Malala’s brother Khushal was born, “[Toor Pekai] had been waiting for a son and could not hide her joy” (Yousafzai 20). Although it could have simply been a matter of preference, Toor Pekai’s hope for a son undoubtedly shows the effect of gender roles on her life. A son means another man in the family, which leads to more opportunity for the family as a whole. Toor Pekai also dropped out of the education system at just six years old. She knew that an education would not be valuable for her, as she was destined to be a housewife. Malala writes, “There seemed no point in going to school to just end up cooking, cleaning and bringing up children, so one day she sold her books for nine annas, spent the money on boiled sweets and never went back” (Yousafzai 40). Toor Pekai’s society pushed her to believe that her education and intelligence as a woman was only as valuable as a few sweets. Despite the fact that Toor Pekai is supportive of her daughter, she is still ruled by the gender roles of her society in Pakistan.

Throughout the book, Malala fights the traditional gender roles her mother has been forced to deal with. Malala’s persistent fight for girls’ education and rights is the main focus of her book. Ever since she has had the power to, Malala has fought. She has had tough conversations and spoken to nations at an extremely young age. Even though she has gone through her fair share of hardship, Malala is successful in her efforts, eventually receiving the Nobel Peace Prize among other awards and support from “thousands and millions” (Yousafzai 288). However, Malala’s work is never done. Her fight will not be over until there is nothing left to fight for, which is simply impossible. Malala writes that she feels a great responsibility, saying, “Peace in every home, every street, every

village, every country—this is my dream. Education for every boy and every girl in the world” (Yousafzai 313). From a young age and continuing on, Malala fights to defy the stereotypes her mother and many other women are held under in Pakistan.

Malala’s accomplishments are all the more meaningful when her mother’s development becomes apparent. As Malala’s activism progresses, her mother begins to make changes in her life that rebel against the traditional stereotypes and rules she’s always known. One of the most notable ways she rebels is by going back to school. As mentioned prior, Toor Pekai quit school at age six because she thought that her fate of being a housewife was already cut out for her. However, as Malala is being shot for being a girls’ education activist, “[her] mother was probably just going through the doorway into [their] school for her first lesson since she had left school” (Yousafzai 241). Malala’s fight for girls’ education inspires her mother to go to school and become literate, even though it is against the law. Toor Pekai’s refusal to follow the sexist laws against the education of women and girls shows the effect Malala has on her.

Throughout the book, Toor Pekai is also known to be more reserved and less likely to speak up. Nevertheless, when their family doesn’t hear any news on the state of Malala after she is shot, Toor Pekai tells Malala’s father, “If there is no news by tomorrow, I will go on a hunger strike” (Yousafzai 284). It is this statement that pushes the general to finally give Malala’s parents some information on their daughter. Toor Pekai’s act of protest is what leads to the communication their family desired. Toor Pekai’s development also stems from the pride she has in her daughter. One of Malala’s biggest accomplishments in the book is speaking at the United Nations. On this day, “[Toor Pekai] allowed herself to be publicly photographed for the first time. As she has lived her life in purdah and never unveiled her face on camera before, it was a great sacrifice and very difficult for her” (Yousafzai 310). Toor Pekai’s development as a person is a direct result of the changes she sees her daughter make in their country and world.

It is a common misconception that role models have to be elders. In Toor Pekai’s case, her daughter is one of her biggest role models. From beginning the book as a woman strongly dictated by the societal norms and sexist ideologies forced toward her, to ending it as a woman who wants to join in on the change her daughter has made, it is clear that Toor Pekai develops as she sees Malala’s fight

for education continue. If anything, Toor Pekai and Malala's example is further encouragement for each and every person to try and make a difference in their own way, no matter what scale. When one person makes a difference, others follow their lead. Each person has the power to begin the domino effect of change that could eventually alter the ever-evolving world.

Works Cited

Yousafzai, Malala and Christina Lamb. *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*. Little Brown and Company, 2015.