

Remembrance of Things Past

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Cherkess women, forced by harsh economic realities to undertake menial work, are being accused of betraying their tribal code of honour

Fatima is 43 but looks well over 60. Her handsome face is deeply lined, her hair streaked with grey. But, more than anything, it is the look of despair in her eyes that makes her appear far older than her years. And, beyond the despair, you can sometimes glimpse an infinite sadness.

For Fatima, each day is a running battle. In the early morning, she struggles out of her apartment, weighed down by enormous bags, and wrestles with the bustling crowds. She has only one thought in her head: that today they won't evict her from her stall at Nalchik market, that today she'll be able to buy bread for her family.

At the market, she jostles for her place, argues furiously with the administration, harangues her customers. Sometimes, the market women come to blows. As their future becomes increasingly uncertain, tempers have been rising.

Fatima has been selling washing-up liquid, bed linen and slippers for the past seven years. This is the only source of income for her five daughters and invalid husband. If Fatima loses her pitch, she loses all hope of providing for them. And that is a future too horrible to contemplate.

She says, "I don't know what I would say if one of my daughters asked, 'Why did you bring me into this world if you can't feed me and clothe me properly?'"

Fatima is a Cherkess, a member of a dignified mountain people who were once considered the aristocrats of the North Caucasus. Hers is a proud legacy. Writers, poets and travellers through the ages have paid tribute to the grace and beauty of the Cherkess women.

In the old days, they were forbidden from taking employment - and even from doing hard work around the home. Fatima can remember her grandmother's stories of times before the 1917 Revolution when the Cherkess considered "trade" a shameful occupation. Then only Armenian and Georgian immigrants went into business while the Cherkess prided themselves on their military prowess and uncompromising code of honour.

In Soviet times, the Cherkess were assimilated into the collective farms and forced to work in the fields. But, even then, they bore their cross stoically and assured each other that, one day, they would reclaim their birthright.

Today, some people accuse the market women of betraying this birthright. They say their children are neglected and grow up in the streets. They say the women are rude and abrasive, fighting over the market stalls and haggling with their customers.

But Fatima can't afford "to put on airs". Carefree student days in the economics faculty of Nalchik's university are forgotten - today life is built around more prosaic concerns.

Fatima buys her goods in Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia, or in Goryachevodsk, near Pyatigorsk. Every day, regardless of her earnings, she has to pay the market "management" for her pitch. She spends whatever is left over on her family - her daughters are aged between two and 17, her husband has been unable to work since he was injured in an industrial accident.

Conditions in the town market are primitive. There is no shelter from the elements. In the spring, the women stand ankle-deep in puddles; in the winter, freezing snow scythes mercilessly across the square.

The authorities are trying to move Fatima and her fellow traders to a new market on the outskirts of town. "If we leave here," says Fatima, "we'll lose our livelihoods. Customers don't go to the new market and there's no telling when they'll start. I have to feed my children every day."

The women are living on borrowed time. One day, they will be physically removed from the market and they live in terror of that day. Sometimes, the tension becomes unbearable and erupts into vicious fist fights.

Their detractors say the husbands are at fault and it is their responsibility to provide for the family. But Fatima shakes her head sadly. "What can they do if there is no work anywhere? Our men can't trade at the market - their mentality doesn't allow them to do that."

And, beyond the sadness and the despair, you can still see a trace of the ancient pride of the Cherkess - a stubborn refusal to bow down to fate.

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