Gender & History

WILEY

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Unhappily Ever After: Self-Knowledge, Living and the Reluctance to Divorce in Contemporary Middle-Class Pakistan

Ammara Maqsood

University College London, London, UK

Correspondence: Ammara Maqsood (a.maqsood@ucl.ac.uk)

Received: 3 September 2024 | **Revised:** 31 January 2025 | **Accepted:** 2 May 2025

Funding: This research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/L0097757/1) and H2020 European Research Council (ERC Starting Grant 802226).

ABSTRACT

This article centres on the emotional self and its relationship with the wider structures that it inhabits to understand why middle-class Pakistani women stay in unhappy marriages. While the reluctance to divorce in this setting is often understood as 'conservatism', I argue for an understanding that acknowledges how the structures of and repertories around marriage – even when it is unhappy – are anchoring in that they generate emotions, logics and sets of reciprocity and affective ties that make life comprehensible and for a coherent sense of self to emerge. Through a focus on the sharing of stories of marital unhappiness as an 'emotional practice', I uncover how the emotions elicited and generated through these narrations guide women and anchor the self, offering an interpretation of what has happened, a way of making meaning of circumstances and, most importantly, a recognition of the labour and endurance through which they have built their lives. Many of the narrative and rhetorical motifs that women draw on in these contexts are those of a self that is subsumed in service to patriarchal family structures. Yet the cumulative self-recognition that emerges through these narratives is of a self that exceeds these normative categories, even as it is dependent on them.

'I know what you are thinking, why have I not left [my husband] … but you would not understand, one cannot just walk away from all you have lived [in a marriage]', said Shireen, a twenty-eight-year-old housewife, while telling me about her marital problems. I had heard many of her stories of marital unhappiness on multiple occasions and – I suspect – my resigned irritation at listening to them again had showed on my face when she commented that I did not understand her decisions. She was somewhat correct in her pronouncements. Over the last nine years, my ethnographic focus has been on upwardly mobile and new middle-class urban groups in Pakistan, and previously (2014–2017) my research centred on ideas of romantic love, intimacy and marital life among young married women. During this fieldwork, I have listened to narratives of marital strife, unhappiness and discontent as often as I have heard stories of joyful romances and bliss. Like with Shireen, these stories were told over and over again, often in the company of and with prompting from other women. My irritation at hearing these stories was not simply about their repetition but also reflective of our differing positionalities and opinions. As I have written previously, urban class politics in the country often pivot on the differences in the moral and religious outlook of what I have called the old and new middle-class in urban Pakistan.[1] The latter consist of groups and families that migrated from villages and small towns to larger cities in the 1980s and 1990s and are often viewed as more conservative in their thinking and outlook than the older urban groups, who are perceived (and portray themselves) as more aligned with modernist ideologies and progressive politics of the

1950s and 1960s. Born and raised in a family that had migrated to Lahore in 1947, at the time of Partition – where women did not veil and usually worked in the professional sector and contributed to the household income – I am located within the old middle-class, unlike my interlocutors, and these differences often came up in our discussions and how we related to one another.

In this instance, my irritation was reflective of my attunement with liberal – progressive ideas, and I found it frustrating that my interlocutor did not seek a divorce. But soon after her comment, I felt a sense of discomfort and embarrassment. Divorce is certainly less taboo in the circles in which I grew up in Pakistan, but there are, in fact, no neat class divisions when it comes to the topic. Several of my relatives and friends have opted to end their marriages, but I have equally seen women – aunties from my parents' generation as well as cousins and friends from my own – is remain in unhappy marriages. When I reflected on my notes later on, my earlier sense of discomfort returned and I felt guilty thinking about these marriages and the lives of interlocutors like Shireen. It was as if, by viewing their decisions from a perspective of conservatism and fears of taboo, I had somehow glossed over or made meaningless the work they put into building and maintaining their lives.

Unlike other parts of the Muslim world, which has seen an evidenced surge in divorce rates in recent decades, the situation in Pakistan is more unclear. Not only in new middle-class circles, in particular, but also on social media and in newspapers more broadly, there is frequent discussion about how divorces have become much more common. Like in other contexts, the increase in incidences of divorce is used as a signal towards the moral laxity of current times or the corroding effects of modernity on 'traditional' ways of being.[2] Existing statistical data is limited, and what is available gives a mixed reading. The national census does not officially state the divorce rate but does collect population figures on marital status. According to this data, from 1981 to 2023, the divorce rate for all adults went from 0.35 to 0.49 *per cent*. But, in the same period, the rate of marriage also increased from 63 to 65.9 *per cent*.[3] The actual rate is most likely higher than this, especially since the census does not record *khula* – that is, when a woman exercises her right to divorce under Islamic law, which is likely to be more marked in some classes and demographic groups than others. Some newspaper reports suggest a surge in divorce rates. For instance, the *Express Tribune* reported in 2024 that the divorce rate had increased by 35 *per cent* in the previous five years in Punjab.[4] The estimate was based on data that the newspaper had collected, but the figures, sample size and methods were not given. Similarly, other newspapers, such as *The Nation*, suggested that a growing number of women are filing for divorce (*khula*), stating that an average of sixty cases per day were submitted in Lahore in 2024.[5] Without comparative figures from previous years and a more expansive sense of the sample size, it is difficult to understand the scale of the increase.

In my fieldwork, I have observed a similarly complex picture. Everyone talked about divorce, and many did consider it as a serious option; however, very few of them – at least, from when I first met the person to now – and have actually divorced. For feminist civil society organisations and advocacy groups, the low incidences of divorce despite enduring marital instability and unhappiness are connected to a broader patriarchal culture, where there are cultural taboos against divorce and persistent legal and economic obstacles for women. They are justified in making these claims, especially given the indicators for gender inequities in Pakistan, where women lag behind in access to health, education, property inheritance and financial independence, and are the frequent target of gender-based violence.[6] With regard to access to divorce, in particular, women continue to face considerable challenges. Although Islamic law does give women the right to divorce, the *nikkahnama* (marriage contract) in Pakistan treats it as conditional upon the husband's permission. A section in the contract asks whether the husband gives the wife the right to divorce and requires a response. For the vast majority of women, this section of the *nikkahnama* is either crossed out or answered in the negative by a family elder even before the woman signs the contract.[7] The absence of this delegated right (*talaq-i-tafweez*) means that a woman cannot divorce through the usual route (available to men) of giving a written or verbal commitment for a divorce in front of two witnesses and then notifying the local council. A woman can still file for divorce without the delegated right but in this instance needs to obtain it through the family courts by way of *khula*, which can be a lengthy and bureaucratic process. Despite changes in legislation that make it easier for women to divorce without the delegated right, there are various other laws and loopholes that favour men, not to mention procedural delays that make the entire process tedious and largely inaccessible for those without financial and legal backing.[8] Women feel discriminated against and are often humiliated in the courts while seeking a divorce, and divorced women as well as their children are often viewed negatively and treated unfairly within their own family, maltreated by former in-laws and face discriminatory attitudes in social and professional circles.[9]

Given these pervasive limitations and gendered prejudices against divorce, it is difficult not to agree with feminist advocacy groups who claim that wider structural problems inhibit women from seeking a divorce. But thinking of my interlocutors as unable to exercise choice and decisively act makes me feel uncomfortable, even as I am painfully aware that they face significant constraints. Viewing my interlocutors from this lens robs them of their agency and presents them as either unable to act for and serve their personal welfare or as held back by a false consciousness inculcated by an unyielding patriarchal system. These representations seem to diminish – if not obliterate – the strength, reflection and ethical dilemmas that I have found in the narratives of my interlocutors living in and through otherwise dissatisfying marital relations. At the heart of my discomfort is not merely a concern around individual agency – whether we should locate it, as liberal perspectives often do, in acts of resistance against structures of power or, as anthropological work in nonliberal contexts illustrates, in inhabiting or living with dominant norms.[10] But, in my discomfort, there is also an unresolved question about our conception of the 'good life' and the pervasive sense (certainly in Western contexts but also beyond) of individual happiness as a central pursuit. My interlocutors and my ethnography more generally offer a worldview in which the self and its happiness are not viewed as a fundamental goal of a moral life; instead, the focus is on how the ethical self is realised and cultivated through marriage and family. This positioning, while immensely meaningful, does not carry within it the unfazed certainty that perspectives on happiness as a central pursuit often

possess: it is full of ambivalences and an acceptance of life's vicissitudes (albeit reluctantly).

This article is an attempt to work through this discomfort and to offer a perspective that acknowledges the labour that my interlocutors put in building and maintaining their lives and how they come to recognise themselves through it. I do this by centring on the emotional self and its relationship with the wider structures that it inhabits. The structures of and repertories around marriage – even when it is unhappy – are anchoring in that they generate emotions, logics, sets of reciprocity and affective ties that make life comprehensible. It becomes possible for a coherent sense of self to emerge. Narratives of marital unhappiness, told and retold between women, are what Monique Scheer has termed an 'emotional practice' – that is, a set of ways of 'doing and saying things' that arouse feelings in self and others.[11] The emotions elicited and generated through these narrations guide women and anchor the self, offering an interpretation of what has happened, a way of making meaning of circumstances, and a recognition of the labour and endurance through which they have built their lives. In this way, emotions and feelings are a form of what Veena Das has called 'self-knowledge' in an otherwise multilayered ordinary that includes fragmentary and contradictory narratives.[12] Many of the narratives and rhetorical motifs that women draw on in these contexts – for instance, what it means to be a good wife, a good mother or a good daughter – are those of a self that is subsumed in service to the patriarchal family structure. Yet the cumulative self-recognition and self-knowledge that emerges through these narratives is of an emotional self that exceeds these structural categories, even as it is dependent on them.

In thinking about the emotional self in motion within a wider structure that both constrains and gives meaning, I am guided by recent anthropological and historical work on marriage and kinship as well as the broader methodological thrust in the history of emotions in South Asia. I take inspiration from how these literatures do not pit the individual against the collective and instead are concerned with the relations between them. Recent work on marriages has disturbed the assumed binary between individual desires and collective obligations and pressures in different ways. Ethnographies of love marriages in South Asia have problematised the assumption of agency as individual autonomy. For instance, in her ethnography of love marriages in Delhi, Perveez Mody describes how women's exercise of agency – in choosing to elope and marry – comes with a simultaneous feeling of accountability towards their family.[13] Similarly, through an analysis of cross-generational narratives on love marriages in Colombo, Asha Abeyasekara finds that young women often feel choice as a burden and responsibility, as their decisions in choosing a spouse reflect on their family's journey of upward mobility and progress.[14] My own previous work on marriage has focused on the entanglements between the personal and the collective by unravelling how young women depend on kin connections to pursue romantic aspirations and desires that are socially frowned upon. I use these instances for a deeper reflection on the opportunities for transgression – for something *more* – that exist within the vestiges of normative structures. Approaches within the history of emotions have been equally sensitive to the blurred lines between 'the social and the individual' and highlighted how emotions are socially habituated, circulated between people and mediated through a variety of cultural artefacts and traditions. This is particularly the case with work on South Asia, where historians have largely been interested in the circulation and expression of emotions rather than their interiority. As Margrit Pernau argues, 'emotions are not (only) inside but in-between' and this 'makes the sharp distinction between emotions and their expression as obsolete'.[15] She argues for a methodological approach where 'the creation of a feeling and its expression … takes place in a single movement, through a variety of media and through practices'.[16] I build on these approaches to think about the emotions produced and evoked in narratives of unhappiness, and how they give individual meaning and contribute to a sense of self.

My focus on an emotional self that depends on normative structures – of marriage and of model female behaviour – to recognise itself but also exceeds beyond these expected roles puts me in conversation with perspectives from intersectional and non-Western feminist theory. Much of this work urges us to situate the gendered subject (and its resistance) within the affective ties and material and moral structures of care and constraint in which it is embedded.[17] I am guided by Khanum Shaikh, who argues that attending to these entanglements exposes the normative and regulatory structures of power in which intimacies and notions of self are produced as well as how they may be decoded from these very sites.[18] This allows us to disrupt normative conceptions of feminist resistance, empowerment and 'individual choice by bringing into view the chosen and unchosen relationalities that both enable and constrain life's possibilities'.[19] For Shaikh, such work allows scholars to tell what Sara Ahmed calls 'other feminist stories', stories that do not repeat the narrative or teleological assumption that feminism is what the 'West gives to the East'.[20] I delve into the affective and normative ties that give self-recognition to the emotional self in the hope to tell an 'other story' but whether it is a feminist one or not remains to be determined.

I start by describing my wider ethnographic context and the centrality of marriage in providing social and economic security, followed by a description of how these concerns are visible in the married life courses and marital decisions of four interlocutors. The following sections turn towards rhetorical motifs and narratives as an emotional practice, through which women share and experience the world and come to recognise themselves. The sense of self that emerges through these emotional practices is tied to heteronormative and patriarchal demands of model female behaviour but exceeds beyond it.

1 | Marriage and the New Middle-Class

In South Asia, like in many other parts of the world, marriage represents a transition into social adulthood and respect.[21] This is particularly the case in Pakistan and especially for women, who rarely live independently before they are married and are usually only able to set up their own household after marriage (although even that is often delayed due to the predominance of joint family living). In affluent upper-class circles and older middle-class groups, women may live independently if they work in a different city from their families, and, increasingly, girls from middle-class backgrounds may live in shared female accommodation for education. But both these scenarios are largely accepted as temporary states and, ultimately, marriage remains the normative

path through which women can make a claim for setting up their own household. Most women in Pakistan are also not financially independent – the country has one of the lowest rates of female participation in the labour force in the world – and, thus, marriage also provides economic security.[22]

In comparison with older middle-class groups, who were able to draw on the state support available in the 1950s and 1960s and share the modernist ethos of the time, new middle-class groups are more conservative, and often viewed as more sympathetic towards and influenced by Islamization policies introduced in the 1980s.[23] The differences in the ideological outlooks of the groups are reflective of differing backgrounds and economic circumstances, greater connections with global Islamic movements and networks enabled through migration and mass media, as well as the transformations and processes related to neoliberal capitalism. While old middle-class groups often came from families involved in the colonial state and the urban professional sphere, new middle-class groups include families hailing from villages and small towns who have migrated to larger cities as well as members of the urban working-class. These groups have undergone a process of embourgeoisement in the last three decades, by utilising a combination of state education and employment alongside opportunities opened through the economic liberalisation of the 1990s. As noted elsewhere, in South Asia, upward mobility is closely associated with the experience, consumption and status of modernity.[24] Locally, this translates into sending children to private English-medium schools, consuming (locally) branded goods, and undertaking Westernised leisure activities. But while state support in the 1980s and the liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s have allowed these groups to rise, the stunted and unpredictable growth combined with the rollback of the state has thwarted their progress since. Typical middle-class professions – such as administrative posts or professional positions (e.g. doctors, lawyers and engineers) in state institutions – rarely come with the income and privileges that can support a lifestyle that my interlocutors associate with being middle-class. Those who are involved in state employment or in other such professions augment their income through the speculative buying and selling of urban property, which often requires collective investment by the extended family. Other families I have interacted with are involved in small businesses and, in a larger environment of little state support, rely on collective family investment for start-up and operational costs. Families also offset costs – of rent, household bills and the need for ready cash – through collective living arrangements.

Overall, a combination of increased desires for consumption and an uncertain economic environment has led to greater dependence on family and joint living.[25] In turn, this has further entrenched the centrality of marriage (and of marrying well) and family in new middle-class groups for maintaining and securing an economic future.[26] Although the younger generation of women in this demographic are all educated, often holding a bachelor's or a master's degree, few work outside the home and are largely dependent on their male affine. Education, as in other South Asian contexts, is viewed as a status symbol and as part of a broader list of credentials and characteristics for raising marriage prospects.[27] Women are discouraged to work for several reasons, many of which are perceived to stem from overarching patriarchal and conservative values. They are perceived as the honour of the family and their movements outside the house are carefully surveilled. In addition, for many new middle-class groups, women not working outside the house serves as a form of distinction from the upper- and lower-classes, who are perceived as morally lax. In my experience, however, my interlocutor's reluctance to work did not only come from an acceptance of these values and constraints. Most of them were uninterested in working as they did not want the double burden of making a financial contribution while attending to duties of care within the family. Aside from being the primary caregiver for their children, women spend considerable amounts of time maintaining relations with the wider family, which is important 'work' (even if it is never recognised as such), given the need for collective support. The few women I met who did work – largely to meet financial burdens – often expressed resentment for having to take on this responsibility and worried that it meant they were not able to properly focus on their children.

The larger environment I have described here is one that offers women few avenues other than marriage to secure an economic and social future. Although I do not want to reduce the reluctance to divorce to just these concerns, I would like to draw out, for now, how these considerations were visible in my interlocutors' decisions to marry and whether to leave or stay in these unions. For instance, Tania, an interlocutor whose life and reflections I have written about extensively elsewhere, had found out, after being married for ten years, that her husband had been having an affair with another woman.[28] When he broke this news, it was to announce his intention to divorce Tania so that he could marry the other woman. Tania had been devastated by this news. Her husband eventually left the other woman and regretted the hurt he had caused Tania, but by that time her feelings for him had irrevocably changed. When Tania and I first met, the affair had already finished, but I could see the pain on her face as she described to me what those initial months had felt like. Listening to her recount how his betrayal had made her feel, I asked her why she had not considered leaving him. 'Back then, I did not want the marriage to end, all I could think of was how I can go back to how things used to be', she said. 'If I had left', she further reflected, 'me and the kids would have gone to live with my parents … and when your parents are old, it is your brother and wife who run that house, you are a guest in their house'. Looking at me, she asked, 'What would you prefer? To be treated badly in your own home or be treated badly in someone else's? … At least [in the former case] you have something that is yours in the end'.

Similar concerns about having a home and a future, along with a continued attachment to the past, played into Asma's decision not to leave what had become a loveless and painful marriage. Asma had been married for eight years when I met her. She had a love marriage, which was an unusual occurrence in both her and her husband's families, where – like in middle-class circles more generally – arranged marriages remain the norm. Asma had met her husband when she was in college. Her husband was her friend's brother, and he had seen Asma standing outside the college gate once when he came to pick up his sister. They had a long courtship, largely because of the time that it took to convince their families to support the match. They were engaged for a year before they got married. I suspect that Asma's parents had been opposed to the marriage partly because it was a love match and partly because they were worried about the man's controlling

nature. Throughout their engagement, he relentlessly surveilled Asma, often making her wear a headset and remain on a call with him for hours just so that he was aware of where she was and with whom. At the time, Asma saw this as a sign of his intense love for her.

But her experience after marriage was different from what she had envisioned and expected. The caring man that she knew disappeared a few months after the marriage. He barely paid any attention to her other than to control her movement all the time. He barely allowed her to leave the house, stopping her even when she wanted to see her parents. Meanwhile, he would be away for hours – not picking up her calls when she phoned – and would turn up late at night, often smelling of alcohol. He was abusive when she asked any questions. They had three children, and Asma spent most of the day doing housework and caring for them. She told me that occasionally he would become 'like he used to be' and 'things would feel good', but most of the time he barely spoke to her and only taunted or abused her if she attempted to question his behaviour. Asma's family, especially her father, repeatedly told her that he would support her if she wanted to leave her husband. Asma sometimes thought about divorcing her husband but never took active steps in that direction. Other than holding on to the memory of what their relationship had once been like, an aspect I discuss more later, Asma did not want to rely on her family's offer. She told me that she did not want to face her family, given that they had always been against the marriage (although no one said anything explicitly). She did not want to admit failure to them. Her concerns match with observations in wider literature that love marriages often place women in a more vulnerable position post-marriage, as they are unable to rely on family members for mediation and support.[29] Asma did not think she could survive on her own. She had never worked after her studies and did not know where she would start. She did not know if she could be financially secure enough to live without her husband or her natal family's support.

Family support also played a role in Gulnaz's decision to accept an arranged marriage and continue to remain in it despite feeling unhappy and trapped. Gulnaz had been in love with a man that she had met online over Facebook, but he belonged to a different Islamic sect than her. Both families were unwilling to accept the match. While he was willing to marry her without their consent, Gulnaz was not ready to elope. She felt unable to separate from them or cause them any pain, and she did not want them to feel disgraced or face criticism within their social circles. Her decision reflects the sense of responsibility and accountability that young women feel towards their families as well as a broader sense that marital success depends on family support.[30] 'I am not sure how we could have survived on our own', she reflected, 'I thought about it all the time … but how could we have lived like that? He would have been disowned by his family; we would have had nothing'. After she ended her relationship with this man, her family – a little anxious that she might change her mind – quickly arranged her marriage to a distant cousin. Gulnaz willingly accepted this match and, when we met, had been married for six years. However, she still felt bitter about the way her life had played out: 'My husband is a good man, he comes from a [financially] stable family, and I live a comfortable life', she said, 'but I feel angry with him all the time, find all kinds of reasons to fight with him'. Gulnaz talked at length about how unhappy she felt in the marriage but then added, 'but what reason is there to leave him, he gives us [her and their children] a comfortable life, where would I be without this comfort'.

2 | Narratives, Emotional Practices and the Self

While marriage is normative and divorce continues to evoke censure, there is – perhaps surprisingly – immense openness and ease with which women talk among themselves about marital unhappiness. When I started my fieldwork, I initially expected that women would be cagey about speaking about their personal lives in an effort to guard their reputations. This was certainly the case with premarital romantic liaisons, and I learned early on that my distance from their social circles was crucial in gaining women's trust.[31] However, when it came to marital distress, women often talked about their lives in the company of others from their social networks. These stories were told often and repeated, and frequently relied on narrative motifs of ideal female behaviour: being a 'good wife', a 'dutiful daughter' and a 'sacrificing mother', as Asha Abeyasekera has also noted in accounts of singleness and marital failure in Colombo.[32] Abeyasekera views these motifs as interpretative repertoires, part of the 'culturally available' narrative expressions that are used to talk about a subject. These narratives are often contradictory and variable, and people move between them in building a comprehensible story and positive self-representation. This was visible in the way these motifs were used by my interlocutors in telling me of their marital unhappiness, and how they would emphasise their position in one role if they felt they had failed the other. For instance, Gulnaz was open about her inability to feel happy in her marriage and that she would often feel angry and resentful towards her husband, but would then situate herself in the role of an 'obedient daughter', who had agreed to this match in line with her family's wishes. Similarly, Asma's unfailing desire to be a 'good wife' was juxtaposed with her failure to be a 'good daughter' and perhaps one of the reasons why she felt that she could not turn to her parents for help. Meanwhile, Tania's insistence on staying in a marriage that she no longer cared for was evidence of the lengths she had gone to for her children's security and well-being in her capacity of a 'self-sacrificing mother'.

Abeyasekera's central claim is that these interpretative repertoires are used by women to resolve ideological dilemmas – for instance, a failed marriage or an inability to marry – and she draws out the intersubjective nature of these narratives as they are told and retold, often with the participation of other women. I would like to build on this to suggest that, among my interlocutors, such narrative motifs are an 'emotional practice', in that they are scripts for feeling and arousing certain emotions.[33] It was Tania's Quran teacher – who I knew from my earlier fieldwork – who had introduced me to her and said that I should listen to her story.[34] The teacher and another student were present when Tania told me about her marriage. Although they had heard the account many times before, they listened attentively and nodded as she spoke and prompted her to continue when she fell silent. Tania told us how, when she first found out her husband was having an affair, she was devastated and was desperate to find a way to keep him from marrying the other woman. On advice from others around her, including teachers at the Quran school she had

started visiting, she cultivated *sabar* (forbearance) in the face of this misfortune. She endured her husband's long absences from home without asking where he had been and remained silent when he taunted her by telling her that his mistress was very pretty. Her eyes filled up with tears as she recounted this, and the other student reached out to squeeze her hand. The student's eyes were also misty. She said that the taunts of the mistress's prettiness reminded her of her aunt whose husband had left her – apparently for a better-looking woman – and the painstakingness with which she had raised her children alone. With more tears flowing, Tania turned to me and said that when a person must endure what she went through, they have no capacity at the time to understand what is happening to them: 'I realised later, when talking to others, how much strength I had and was showing just to keep going'.

Shared narratives are emotional practices that, as Scheer has noted, mobilise and name emotions.[35] They are established cultural scripts that help individuals connect past events and experiences together and evoke the 'memory of emotions' to create a particular mood or disposition in the present.[36] Tania's account, for instance, ignited in the other student the memories of her aunt's experience, and the emotional response to that connected with and guided her feelings in the present. The emotions garnered by Tania's narrative helped guide the student's emotions, and the ensuing conversation – the linking of Tania's experience with those of others, the discussion of the strength of sacrificing mothers – aided Tania in recognising and making meaning of her experiences. Emotions are explored and understood through available narrative motifs and cultural scripts, but this process does not take place in an 'interior', as William Reddy has argued, but in relation with others.[37] Tania's recognition of her emotions and what they signified was based on the response she evoked in others present in the room and, in turn, the memories and experiences that they shared with her. The emotional response of others becomes a mirror of sorts – as Tania said, she recognised her emotions and, beyond that, herself through and in the presence of others.

An emotional self that develops in and through relations depends on the testimony and recognition of others to come into being. I first met Gulnaz in the company of her husband and children. Another interlocutor, who was friends with Gulnaz, was visiting them with her family for tea and had invited me to go with them. Gulnaz and I enjoyed chatting with each other at the tea, and, after learning about my research, she expressed an interest in being interviewed. A couple of weeks later, we met alone for an interview where she told me of her ongoing resentment about not being able to marry the man she loved. As we talked, she told me how she had asked me to interview her because it made her 'feel lighter' to share her life story with others. 'Whenever I speak to others about this and they see the painful choices I have made in my life, the way I have upheld my family's demands', she shared, 'I am able to see myself for who I am … Some days, I think I am just an angry and ungrateful person, who lashes out unreasonably on her husband all the time … but telling my story, I see myself differently'. It is through making oneself known and understood that a coherent self and subjectivity emerges, and a person gains a moment of self-recognition for the life they have lived and created. For my interlocutors, the stories they tell of marital strife are stories of unhappiness, but they are also stories that demand a recognition of their strength from others. To take a cue from Das's reflections on language and words, these stories are akin to second-person statements about the world – that is, 'they seek someone who can receive the words that give testimony to myself'.[38]

The shared narratives I have described here are reflective of the broader structure in which they arise. They are constraining in that they only offer space and movement within roles that conform to the normativity of marriage and kinship obligations, but simultaneously give life and its experiences meaning and a recognisable form that can be shared and understood by others. Shared narratives engender emotions that are felt together and speak of a relational self in the sense that women come to understand themselves through this process of exchange. In a very different context of gendered and racialised hierarchies in institutions within the UK, Sara Ahmed draws out how the act of complaint is generative, not in that it leads to institutional change or acknowledgement but in how it transforms the complaining individual. The act of articulating and registering the complaint as well as witnessing and undergoing the procedural processes creates a new awareness and sense of self. Among my interlocutors, the coming together and sharing of narratives of unhappiness does not lead to any material or tangible change, but it forges together a different sense of self. As much as this notion of self depends on shared and relational narratives that are modelled on expected behaviour and roles, it is also individual and sometimes extends beyond these normative models.

Tania found great solace in sharing her stories with others and it provided her with a sense of her own strength, as we saw above. Some weeks after I had listened to her marriage story with her friends, we met again and talked about her life. She told me of how it was only at the Quran school, when she started speaking with other women about her life, that she truly came to understand what had happened to her. But then she added, 'what I have realised is this, that in moments of great turmoil in your life, in moments of great pain and suffering, you stand alone in front of God, there is no one there. I know what that is like'. Tania's remark reminds us of the interconnected yet individual nature of life and of the self. To hold meaning and shape, her experience required a recognition and emotional response from others. Yet the meaning she made of them – that 'you stand alone' – also spoke of a self that is distinct from others and the broader social world in which it exists. I return to this idea in the last section and, for now, continue with the idea of the interconnected emotional self.

3 | Life as Laying a Claim on Others

Marshall Sahlins speaks of kinship as 'mutuality of being', in that kinfolk – however defined or conceived of locally – are 'intrinsic to one another's existence … to life itself'.[39] Among my interlocutors, this mutuality of being was visible not just in the need for testimony and shared emotions in recognising the self but also in how they drew upon the connections and reciprocities within structures of marriage and kinship to make a moral claim for themselves. The difference between idealised norms and their actual experience was often a way in which these claims were articulated. Throughout my fieldwork, there were many instances

where my interlocutors expressed hurt and disappointment at not being given the appropriate respect or love that is due to a married woman. For instance, women who have had love marriages that have not been accepted by their families often talk of the sadness they feel on not receiving any attention from in-laws, especially the ritualised exchange and celebrations at important milestones, such as the birth of children. Although otherwise happy with her husband, Annie confided in me the sadness that she felt that her mother-in-law had never visited her in hospital when she gave birth to their son. As is the custom, at the birth of a child, the mother is often given jewellery by her mother-in-law. Annie told me that her mother-in-law had knitted a hat for all the other children born in the family to wear when leaving the hospital. But in Annie's case, she said that there had been no hat and no jewellery: 'I felt so sad, still feel teary when I think I had a baby, and no one acknowledged it … She [mother-in-law] just called me on the phone'. Similarly, another interlocutor, who had married against her family's wishes, mentioned the hurt that she had felt at their absence at the wedding, especially of her sister-in-law. Her husband's family had organised a small event to mark the marriage, and had invited her family members in a bid to normalise relations. In response, her two brothers had come but left without eating. She said, 'more than anything, I felt bad … still feel sad … that my younger sister-in-law did not come. My mother, I can understand, she was forbidden but she loves me, but my sister-in-law, she could have convinced my brother [her husband] … and we were so close, she knew how difficult this was for me'.

These instances are revealing of a relational self, and the ways in which ritualised activities around marriage are viewed as a form of acknowledgement of events within a life course. Like with stories of pain within a marriage, important events and milestones require testimony and recognition. But beyond recognition, these instances also reflect the moral claim – of expecting and demanding acknowledgement – on ties and kin created through marriage. To draw on Judith Butler's idea of 'constitutive vulnerability', these claims are not only reflective of a sense of intersubjectivity in 'that the ties we have to others … compose us' but also extend towards what we can demand and expect of each other.[40] As Das writes, complaints of hurt and neglect (*gila* or *shikwa*) within kin are markers of intimacy.[41] 'Reproach', she reminds us, 'is a particular moment in the give and take of love' and is directed towards those who are part of networks or relations of care and intimacy. Outside of the natal family, kin established through marriage are one of the few avenues where women can make a moral claim of acknowledgement – to demand what is due to them as a person within that relation. Speaking of the absence of these relations of care does not efface the self as much as it furthers its claim on the world, for it becomes a testament to a life that has been lived and borne independently.

In networks of kin and marriage, personhood is composed through claims not just on others but on the self by present and spectral relations. In her ethnography of working-class women in northern Vietnam, Tine Gammetoft urges us to consider the spectral, the inchoate and imaginal dimensions of relatedness that exceed physical and present kinship arrangements, in understanding the endurance of physical and mental distress in marital life.[42] Imaginal and spectral relations, she argues, sustain her interlocutors and render their endurance meaningful. For instance, she notes that children are often central in how and why women endure, as well as a way through which the imaginal aspects of kinship can physically manifest. In northern Vietnam, where kinship is patrilocal and patrilineal, by bearing and raising children, women become fuller members of their husband's families and kin groups while also creating a mother–child unit that affords them some protection.[43] Similar motivations and imaginations are visible in my ethnography and especially in the idea described above of making a moral claim over others through marriage. By remaining in their marriage and bearing and raising their children, my interlocutors hope to gain more presence within and stronger relations with the extended kin in their married families. In this sense, as Gammeltoft writes, 'endurance' in an unhappy marriage 'can be seen as a way that women constitute moral being in relation to others'.[44]

Children are also central in how the 'past and future aspects of relations are present in a vivid and pressing way'.[45] In my interactions with my interlocutors, past experiences and the potential of the future came together in discussions surrounding children. Reflecting on her decision to marry her husband, Gulnaz told me of how, despite her bitterness, she recognised that she and her husband were in harmony when it came to the children's future. 'Already, my husband is thinking that we cannot stay in this house in a joint family set up when Nosheen is older', she said, referring to her ten-year-old daughter. Echoing the aspirations of most upwardly mobile families, who associate success with a spatial move to more affluent areas, she said 'we would want to be in a nice house in a residential colony so we can move around in a different social circle and get good [marriage] proposals for her'. Her husband had recently bought a file for a plot of land in an upcoming housing scheme, in the hope that this investment would lead to an eventual new home. Gulnaz's imaginings for her daughter were infused with her own hopes for the future and gave meaning to her present. But just as the spectre of her future self hinged Gulnaz's present, it was her past sense of self and the life she had imagined that kept Asma in her marriage. 'There are moments when my husband is back to how he used to be … and I remember how I used to feel like then', sighed Asma. She continued, saying that 'Back then, I did not care what anyone said, I felt so strong in my decisions and choices'. Asma's memories of her husband's love animates her present and, in some ways, she remains in the marriage to hold on to her past sense of self, to not let it completely disappear.

Ghosts of past relations live in and shape the present in other ways as well. Once when we were talking about her past love, I asked Gulnaz – half-jokingly – whether she ever stalked him on social media. She laughed at the question and then, immediately, sobered as she confessed that she thought about it many times but did not act on it as she was scared that she would not be able to stop herself from sending him a message. She went on to confess that, sometimes, when she was on her own she would pretend that she was married to her past love and that this was their home that she was looking after. 'Like I am in the kitchen cooking, and I pretend that I am waiting for him to come back from work and that I am making him his favourite meal as a surprise', she admitted, looking a little embarrassed. Spectral kinship, Gammeltoft argues, takes us beyond the common perception of 'kinship as social performance' and instead casts light 'on its shadow side' and how it is 'also ecstatic, exceeding the

immediately manifest'.[46] Here, it is the shadow side, and what exceeds the present within it, that allows the social performance of kinship to remain intact.

* * *

In her reflections on textures of the ordinary, Das sheds light on the 'volatility that might just lie below the surface of habits' and 'the turbulent waters that often flow behind the seemingly peaceful and the uneventful everyday'.[47] Within exchanges of kinship, what Das sometimes calls the 'aesthetics of kinship', these undercurrents sometimes rise to the surface and then disappear again.[48] Her larger argument on the descent into the ordinary is to understand the subtle ways in which these undercurrents gnaw away at the routine or habit of the everyday and to see the potentialities for something new to emerge when the ordinary breaks down. In my fieldwork, under the ubiquity of marriage – the ordinariness of women to endure the unhappiness and labour within it – lurk feelings, spectres and selves that run counter to the surface but coexist. They speak of a self that exceeds the structural and affective ties that anchor and make it. Sometimes it is these opposing emotions that actually allow the dominant norms to persist and survive.

Tania was thankful and relieved when her husband ended his affair and returned to their family. To her surprise, though, she found that she no longer felt attached to him or the life that they had created together. In the time since her husband had revealed his infidelity, Tania, with the help of her Quran teachers, had become more observant of a pious Muslim life and found that she now felt more contentment in her religious study than her family life. She said, 'I do all the things for my family because it is my duty to, but my heart is no longer there, I do not feel that way about my husband anymore'. Later in the conversation, she told me that sometimes she feels a little irritated when her husband wants to have sex with her, and that it feels like an imposition on her body and time. Seeing my look of surprise at her admission and, possibly, pre-empting my question on why she acquiesced to his demands, she asked, 'What does it matter, to give your body in exchange for security, marriage is basically that? … I think to myself, I can mostly live the kind of life I want, so I just carry on'. In this interaction, for a moment, a fragment of an alternate self and a different set of logics appeared, logics that critique the sanctity of marriage but at the same time do not question it.

Acknowledgements

Fieldwork and writing for this article were supported by an Economic and Social Research Council Future Research Leaders Fellowship for the project 'To Pakistan with Love: Islam, Intimacy and Transnational Marriages' (ES/L0097757/1) as well as the European Research Council Starting Grant 'Multi-Religious Encounters in Urban Settings' (802226). Earlier versions of my argument were presented in 2023 at a workshop on divorce at the New York Historical Society, organised by Karen Vallgårda and Kristen Celello, and at a follow-up workshop in 2024, at the Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies programme at Stanford University, organised by Rachel Jean-Baptiste, Karen Vallgårda and Kristen Celello. I am grateful for the generative discussion and feedback at both these venues and, especially, to Karen, Kristen and Rachel for inviting an anthropologist among historians. I want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their close and generous engagement with my work and for helping me to refine my argument. I am deeply indebted to my interlocutors for their openness and courage in sharing their lives with me. Any shortcomings are entirely my own.

Throughout this article, I have used pseudonyms for people and changed some identifying details. My interlocutors spoke in Urdu, Punjabi and English. All translations are my own.

Endnotes

[1] Ammara Maqsood, 'Buying Modern', *Cultural Studies* 28 (2014), pp. 84–107; Ammara Maqsood, *The New Pakistani Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Ammara Maqsood, 'Love in Liminality: The Modes and Spaces of Intimacy in Middle-Class Pakistan', *South Asian History and Culture* 12 (2021), pp. 261–277; Ammara Maqsood, 'Love as Understanding', *American Ethnologist* 48 (2021), pp. 93–104.

[2] See also Magnus Marsden, 'Love and Elopement in Northern Pakistan', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007), pp. 91–108.

[3] I have used the figures on the total number of divorced individuals and the total number of age-eligible population recorded in the census to suggest an estimate for the current divorce rate. See 'Population Census 2023', Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, https://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/population-census.

[4] Khalid Rashid, 'The Rate of Divorce Has Increased by 35 Per Cent During the Past Five Years', *Express Tribune*, 14 April 2024. https://tribune.com.pk/story/2462573/the-rate-of-divorce-has-increased-by-35-per-cent-during-the-past-five-years.

[5] 'Divorce Ratio in Lahore Surges Amid Intolerance, Economic Hardships', *The Nation*, 9 September 2024. https://www.nation.com.pk/09-Sep-2024/divorce-ratio-in-lahore-surges-amid-intolerance-economic-hardships.

[6] In the World Economic Form's Gender Index 2024, Pakistan ranks 145 out of 146 (https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf). Pakistan has one of the lowest rates for female participation in the labour force (FLFP); in 2019, the country's FLFP for women ages 15–64 was 22.6 *per cent*, which is significantly lower than the world average of 52.6 *per cent* and even low compared to the South Asian average of 25.2 *per cent* (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=PK). In the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017–2018, data on domestic violence and abuse were collected for the first (and only time). According to this survey, 28 *per cent* of women aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence since the age 15, and 6 *per cent* have reported sexual violence. Thirty-four per cent of ever-married women have experienced spousal physical, sexual or emotional violence (https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR354/FR354.pdf). The report notes that the actual figure is expected to be much higher due to underreporting of violence.

[7] Shirkat Gah Women Resource Centre, *Shifting Boundaries in Marriage & Divorce in Muslim Communities* (Lahore: Shirkat Gah Women Resource Centre, 1996); Zubair Abbasi, 'Women's Right to Unilateral No-Fault Divorce in Pakistan and India', *Jindal Global Law Review* 7 (2016), pp. 81–95. See also Kaveri Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown Among British Asians: Conjugality, Legal Pluralism and New Kinship*, *Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life* (London: Springer Nature, 2016), xvii.

[8] Asfand Yar Warraich, 'Divorce and disparity', *The Dawn*, 9 March 2021. https://www.dawn.com/news/1613356; Maham Javaid, 'Why Women in Pakistan Struggle to Get "Divorced With Dignity"', *Al Jazeera*, 7 March 2019. https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/3/7/why-women-in-pakistan-struggle-to-get-divorced-with-dignity.

[9] Mehwish Khalid, Maryam Saleem and Altaf Ghani, 'Post-Divorce Issues and Challenges: A Phenomenological Study of Divorced Mothers From District Sialkot, Pakistan', *Pakistan Language and Humanities Review* 7 (2023), pp. 640–651.

[10] Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival', *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001), pp. 202–236; Ammara Maqsood, 'The Work of Time: Personhood, Agency, and the Negotiation of Difference in Married Life in Urban Pakistan', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 30 (2024), pp. 58–74; Amira Mittermaier, 'Dreams From Elsewhere: Muslim Subjectivities Beyond the Trope of Self-Cultivation', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (2012), pp. 247–265.

[11] Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory* 51 (2012), p. 209.

[12] Veena Das, 'Ethics, Self-Knowledge, and Life Taken as a Whole', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (2018), pp. 537–549; Veena Das, *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology After Wittgenstein* (Manhatten: Fordham University Press, 2020), xiii.

[13] Perveez Mody, *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi*, *Critical Asian Studies* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2008), xx.

[14] Asha L. Abeyasekera, 'Narratives of Choice: Marriage, Choosing Right and the Responsibility of Agency in Urban Middle-Class Sri Lanka', *Feminist Review* 113 (2016), pp. 1–16.

[15] Margrit Pernau, 'Studying Emotions in South Asia', *South Asian History and Culture* 12 (2021), p. 115.

[16] Margrit Pernau, 'Mapping Emotions, Constructing Feelings: Delhi in the 1840s', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58 (2015), p. 635.

[17] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1987), xix; Suad Joseph, 'Connectivity and Patriarchy among Urban Working-Class Arab Families in Lebanon', *Ethos* 21 (1993), pp. 452–484; Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent'; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), xvi.

[18] Khanum Shaikh, 'Intimate Critique: Toward a Feminism from Within', *Feminist Studies* 48 (2022), p. 372.

[19] Shaikh, 'Intimate Critique', p. 383.

[20] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[21] Jane Fishburne Collier, *From Duty to Desire: Remaking Families in a Spanish Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. xi; Henrike Donner, 'One's Own Marriage: Love Marriages in a Calcutta Neighbourhood', *South Asia Research* 22 (2002), pp. 79–94; Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas, *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 265; Mody, *Intimate State*.

[22] See endnote 6.

[23] These are, of course, stereotypical representations and what appears as 'overly religious' is more a matter of perception than of a unified religious identity.

[24] Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. xviii; Sanjay Srivastava, *Passionate Modernity: Sexuality, Class, and Consumption in India* (Delhi: Routledge, 2007), viii.

[25] Maqsood, 'Love in Liminality'; see also Geert De Neve, 'The Economies of Love: Love Marriage, Kin Support, and Aspiration in a South Indian Garment City', *Modern Asian Studies* 50 (2016), pp. 1220–1249.

[26] Maqsood, 'Love as Understanding', p. 96.

[27] Donner, 'One's Own Marriage'.

[28] Maqsood, 'Work of Time'.

[29] De Neve, 'Economies of Love'; Donner, 'One's Own Marriage'.

[30] Abeyasekera, 'Narratives of Choice'; Mody, *Intimate State*; De Neve, 'The Economies of Love'.

[31] Maqsood, 'Love as Understanding'.

[32] Asha L. Abeyasekera, '"Living for Others": Narrating Agency in the Context of Failed Marriages and Singleness in Urban Sri Lanka', *Feminism & Psychology* 27 (2017), pp. 427–446.

[33] Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice'.

[34] Maqsood, *New Pakistani Middle Class*.

[35] Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice', p. 209, p. 212.

[36] Pernau, 'Mapping Emotions', p. 649.

[37] William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xiv.

[38] Veena Das, 'Ethics, Self-Knowledge, and Life Taken as a Whole', p. 543.

[39] Marshall Sahlins, 'What Kinship Is (Part One),' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17 (2011), p. 2.

[40] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), xxi, p. 23.

[41] Das, 'Ethics, Self-Knowledge', p. 539.

[42] Tine M. Gammeltoft, 'Spectral Kinship', *American Ethnologist* 48 (2021), p. 23.

[43] Gammeltoft, 'Spectral Kinship', p. 28.

[44] Gammeltoft, 'Spectral Kinship', p. 28.

[45] Gammeltoft, 'Spectral Kinship', p. 29.

[46] Gammeltoft, 'Spectral Kinship', p. 33.

[47] Das, 'Ethics, Self-Knowledge', p. 538; Veena Das, *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), p. 21.

[48] Das, 'Ethics, Self-Knowledge', p. 539.