

# The work of time: personhood, agency, and the negotiation of difference in married life in urban Pakistan

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What is the work of time on a marriage, and how does it transform people as they struggle to change and leave traces on others? Through reflections of middle-class women in Pakistan who married men who did not share their religious aspirations, I focus on how difference is negotiated and conceived in these marriages, and on the unexpected outcomes in the religious outlook of both spouses. The work of time, articulated through the concept of *sabar* (forbearance), emerges here as a canvas for a confluence of human and nonhuman interventions, influences, and motivations, urging us to think of individual agency neither as autonomous action, as theorized in the liberal tradition, nor as wilful submission, as elaborated in Islamic contexts. Rather, agency, the capacity to assert one's own visions and hopes, depends on the malleability and openness of persons to time, leaving those who desire change in others equally exposed to transformation.

What is the work of time on a marriage, and how does it transform people as they struggle to change and leave traces on others? If time and contingency shape people, altering their behaviour and that of those around them, what does this mean for who they are as persons? I found myself asking these questions as I listened to women in Lahore explain how they had been ambivalent and hesitant about marrying men who did not share their own religious aspirations and desires for a pious life. After a few years, however, some found that the religious outlook of their spouses had shifted, and that the men had become more observant and pious. Although they did not deny they had hoped for and actively sought this outcome, neither did they claim full responsibility for it. Deploying conceptions of *sabar* (forbearance), time was used to both mark and explain shifts in attitudes as well as to speak of the contingencies that had shaped their married life and relationship. But just as time had 'worked' on their husbands, it had not left the women unchanged in their own religious practices and beliefs. While some had little time for prayer and learning, others found themselves in states that were in sharp contrast to their earlier desires and yearning for the future. Agency, the capacity to assert one's own visions and hopes, depends on the malleability and 'openness' (Mittermaier

*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 00, 1-17

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2011; 2012) of persons to time, leaving those who desire change in others equally exposed to transformation.

Openness, the sense that the actions of others act on and constitute the self, has been touched upon in debates in various disciplines. In recent years, it has been central in Judith Butler's formulation of constitutive vulnerability, an idea that emphasizes the interdependence of subjects, 'that the ties that we have to others ... compose us' (2004: 23). In anthropology, this idea of relationality as constitutive of self has long been present in debates around personhood, originally discussed predominantly in relation to non-Western persons (LiPuma 1998; Marriott 1976; Strathern 1988) but now viewed as a general feature of all selves (Englund & Leach 2000; Ewing 1990; Osella & Osella 2004). My focus, however, is more on how these questions have come up in discussions of agency in non-liberal contexts. More specifically, I reflect on relationality in thinking about forms of agency that, as Mittermaier argues, are centred neither on 'acting against' structures of power, as commonly theorized in the liberal tradition, nor on 'acting within them' (2012: 252), as elaborated by Mahmood (2001; 2005). In her ethnography of visitations and divinatory dreams within a Sufi community in Cairo, Mittermaier (2011; 2012) emphasizes the centrality of an 'openness' to being 'acted upon' – to be a 'patient' rather than an agent – in the religious lives of her interlocutors. She thus speaks of a 'more open and dialogically constituted subject, one who is not only an agent but also a patient who is acted upon' (Mittermaier 2011: 86).

Here, I draw upon this notion of the openness of the subject and, like Mittermaier, write of an environment where multiple forms of agency converge and foreshadow the centrality of individual action and intention. The focus, however, is not on an openness to the Elsewhere – '(in)visible, the *barzakh*, the imaginary and the emergent' – as Mittermaier has elaborated (2011: 56). Instead, it is on the various kinds of networks and interplay between divine agency and human actions, and the interactions with others and their influence on the self. Ultimately, the openness described here is an openness towards time, in and through which these relations play out, and the recognition and reliance on its capacity, even if unpredictably so, to transform, unravel, and make the self and others. The cultivation of *sabar* in my interlocutors demonstrates both an openness towards time and the acceptance that its work is unpredictable and outside human control. Attending to *sabar* in this sense challenges conventional understandings of sovereign subjects as the seat of action and agency. Instead, it brings to the forefront the paradoxical notion that the individual (agentively) self-cultivates and thereby becomes a patient (rather than agent) of human and nonhuman relations and forces.

I locate the capacity to do and the cultivation of *sabar* as a distinct feature of a pious Islamic life as well as infused within a larger ethics of waiting in South Asia. Commonly used in Urdu and Punjabi to mean 'patience', *sabar* is widely deployed in South Asia, in and outside Muslim contexts, to talk of forbearance in the face of difficulty and suffering (Das 1997; Qureshi 2013; 2018). It is a general marker of virtuous comportment and exemplary personhood in all sexes, but one that is predominantly talked of in relation to women and in contexts of difficulties in married life. This is one of the reasons, and rightly so perhaps, that in feminist circles in Pakistan, claims to *sabar* are derided for encouraging women to put up with unhappiness and abuse instead of opting to divorce. Beyond the wider gendered expectation of women demonstrating *sabar*, for my pious interlocutors, the idea that one's spouse is predestined inflects marital difficulties as a test meted out by Allah. In many ways, the waiting that is part of their labour of cultivating and living with *sabar* dovetails with a wider sensibility in South

Asia that all problems resolve themselves in the fullness of time. Encapsulated in the oft-used response '*thorā intezār karo, koī hal nikal āyāy ga*' (wait a little, some solution will be found) to anyone expressing frustration about any difficulties, such ways of thinking also reflect an underlying trust in the passage of time. However, the work I emphasize in my ethnography is not simply about the labour of waiting, which, once again accentuates the individual, but also about being a patient to the action of time.

I reflect upon these concerns of agency, time, and personhood through the life stories, accounts, and experiences of young married women from upwardly mobile backgrounds in Lahore, collected in fieldwork conducted in 2016–17.<sup>1</sup> Most of my interlocutors were in their twenties or early thirties; some had recently wedded, while others had already been married for several years when we met. My focus on pious women marrying men who are not equally religious reflects some of the ongoing trends in the broader demographic that is central to my ethnographic enquiry and fieldwork. As discussed in the next section, my interlocutors belong to what has been broadly described as 'the new middle class' (Maqsood 2017). There is a noticeable trend towards piety and Islamic learning in these groups, but one that is disproportionately more noticeable in women than in men. Within these circles, like in Pakistan more broadly, the socioeconomic importance of marriage, especially for women, is immense, and arranged unions remain the 'norm' (Maqsood 2021a; 2021b). Often, because of the pressure to get married and the lack of options, many women find themselves in matches where their spouses do not share their religious aspirations.

Attending to these ethnographic concerns also allows me to reflect on how difference is negotiated over time in such settings. Following recent perspectives, emanating from ethnographic work on South Asia, I treat difference as productive, in that it carries potentialities for experimentation, 'becoming', and exchange, even as it threatens to disrupt and break apart (Gilmartin 2010; Khan 2006; 2010; 2012; Ring 2006). Given the security-centric frame that predominates in analyses of Islam in Pakistan, it is tempting to think of sectarian differences as imploding into violence. Yet in my fieldwork, I routinely come across families where some members follow a particular movement, while others have opted for a different sect. Although these differences may occasionally erupt into estrangement or threats of violence, they are, for the most part, ongoing and open-ended negotiations between people and families, and in different areas of public and intimate life (Ring 2006). Marriage is one such intimate site where difference does not collapse but becomes a means through which people relate to one another, evaluate their relationships, and make sense of their lives. The generative capacities of difference here are not located in extraordinary encounters (Khan 2006), moments, and figures or in (the spectre of) spectacular violence (Das 1995; 2007). Instead, they are found within the mundane (Das 2010), in the very ordinariness of women in South Asia being expected to 'adjust' (Uberoi & Tyagi 1994) in married life.

The ethnography presented here is on selfhood, marriage, and relationality but it is enmeshed within the ambit of Islam, in terms of both my interlocutors' religious influences and the theoretical debates that are addressed. Much of the recent work on ethical self-cultivation in Islam has critiqued a singular focus on piety by pointing towards fragmentation, conflict, and contradictions (Schielke 2009; 2015a; Soares & Osella 2009; Schielke & Debevec 2012) faced by people in their religious pursuits, and suggested that the 'everyday' offers a fuller picture of Muslim lives. In turn, others have been sceptical of this criticism, and view the emphasis on the 'everyday' as undermining non-liberal subjectivities (Fadil & Fernando 2015). My interest in my

interlocutors' religious pursuits and *sabar* does not privilege a 'disciplinary' analytic and nor do I, in tracing their lapses or shifts over time, take an 'everyday Islam' approach (Fadil & Fernando 2015; Schielke 2015a). Rather, following Menin's call for placing the 'everyday and the transcendent' (2020: 517) in the same conceptual frame, I attend to how the notion of *sabar* inflects the ordinary tasks of domestic life. Chance events and contingencies take on deeper meaning as my interlocutors reflect on their marriage. The ethnography thus remains mindful of the emphasis on an individual relationship with Allah noticeable in new forms of piety. But it broadens the scope to include interactions and relations with others, viewing self-cultivation as a process that depends on influences from kin and affines as well as on the workings of larger processes and events, sometimes interpreted as destiny. In this sense, my argument reinserts both my interlocutors and the study of Islam within wider networks and relationships that shape them.

### Piety, marriage, and becoming

In her late twenties when we first met, Sameen had been married for six years, with two small children. She had a graduate degree in economics, but did not work, while her husband, Haider, was a policeman. When they had first got married, Sameen had been ambivalent about the prospect. She had been raised in a family that she herself called 'traditionally religious', in the sense that her parents were observant of most Islamic precepts but not learned in such matters. Inspired by her aunt, who had become a Qur'an school teacher, Sameen had started reading the Qur'an to 'understand our faith better' and was keen to marry someone who shared her religious aspirations. But none of the proposals seemed suitable in this regard. As Sameen put it: 'It was important for me that a person observed the rituals of Islam (prayer, fasting, etc.) and understood their meaning'. Her parents, meanwhile, anxious not to delay her marriage, were putting considerable pressure on her to choose from the available proposals. Her aunt, reminding her that marriage pleases Allah, advised that rather than not marry at all, she should consider someone whose heart was open to His message.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Sameen accepted a proposal from Haider, who was not observant of the daily rituals but, as she described, 'had a good heart and was kind and open towards all'.

Sameen's dilemma highlights the entanglements and tensions between desires for pious becoming, familial obligations, and practical concerns faced by many young middle-class women in urban Pakistan. As noted above, over the last two decades, there has been a general increase in personal piety across genders in Pakistan, but one that is particularly noticeable amongst women. Although women were traditionally excluded from religious learning and much of the focus was on men, there has been a rise of Islamic movements centred on (and often led by) women across the Muslim world. Within the upwardly mobile urban families on which my fieldwork focuses, almost all women have – at least at some point in their lives – attended *dars* (Qur'an study circles) gatherings, while a few have completed full courses and diplomas from Qur'an schools. In practice, not everyone who seeks religious guidance is actively or equally committed to cultivating Islamic ethics. There are, instead, a range of attitudes: there are some who are actively attempting to bring their daily life strictly in line with prescribed practices; others who attempt for some time and then lapse; and yet more who plan to become more observant someday but have not yet reached such a status. The overall environment, though, is one where there is greater observance of

Islamic practices amongst women, and the presence of greater possibilities for what Naveeda Khan (2012) terms 'Muslim becoming'.

The increased emphasis on piety has not, however, reduced the social importance of marriage or provided women with greater choice in such matters. In other parts of the Muslim world, and especially in diaspora contexts, the prevalence of female-led and -centred Islamic movements has led to increased autonomy in marital matters as women assert their religious knowledge to counter parental decisions and practices that they view as steeped in 'tradition and culture' (Hoque 2019; Liberatore 2016). The picture in Pakistan is more mixed. Although Islamic learning has given authority to advise and give opinions, much of it is confined to other women, usually of the same age. Amongst my interlocutors, and, more broadly, in the Qura'n schools and *dars* gatherings that I have attended, the duty upon all women to marry and raise a family is rarely questioned.

Teachers and sermon-givers place great emphasis not just on getting but also on staying married, urging women to practise *sabar* in the face of marital strife and pointing towards the ills in societies where there are many broken families. In line with traditional mainstream Islamic discourses, teachers and learned women all talk of the importance of getting married young to avoid temptation and propagate marriage as an act that pleases Allah and is part of the way of the Prophet (Sunnah). In situations where women are unable to find a match that is in line with their religious ideals, they are usually counselled, as Sameen was, to accept the proposal that is available. Similarly, those in unhappy marriages are advised to stay together for the sake of the children and to remain open to possibilities of positive change in their marital life in the future.

The religious insistence on forming and maintaining a marriage dovetails with wider socioeconomic pressures. For middle-class women, marriage not only marks social adulthood but is also a means for securing an economic future. Although educated often to Bachelors or Masters level, most women in these circles do not work outside the house and are largely dependent on male affines.<sup>3</sup> More broadly, in the new middle-class groups that I work within, a combination of increased desires for consumption and an uncertain economic environment has led to greater dependence on family and joint living (Maqsood 2021a: 96; 2021b; see also De Neve 2016). Many of the families I interact with are involved in small businesses and, in a larger environment of little state support, rely on collective family investment for start-up and running costs. Meanwhile, typical middle-class professions, such as administrative posts or professional positions (doctors, lawyers, engineers) in state institutions, rarely come with the income and privileges that can support such a lifestyle. Those who are involved in state employment or in other such professions augment their income through speculative buying and selling of urban property, which also requires collective investment. It is through living together and family support that individuals achieve success in their entrepreneurial ventures and are also able to consume the pleasures of their success. In these circumstances, it is important for my female interlocutors to marry into families that can provide economic support and, more importantly, to maintain social relations with different members.

Thus, although pious women place immense importance on a suitably religious partner, these aspirations sometimes conflict with other concerns of socioeconomic mobility and family obligations, or are not realized due to lack of choices. Like Sameen, another interlocutor, Hania, had been keen to marry someone who shared her religious convictions. She had finished a Bachelors degree in Islamic studies and had also completed a diploma from a *madrassa* – like her family, she was observant of the

traditions and precepts of Ahl-e-Sunnat (locally called Barelwi), a sect that accords centrality to Sufi elders and shrines.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of any viable proposals, Hania had started teaching Islamic studies in a small school, which gave her something to do, but she and her family remained concerned about her marriage prospects. The few proposals she did get were from men who lived abroad, which her father did not want to entertain as he was against sending her outside Pakistan. When they finally received a proposal from a family that belonged to the same sect, with the boy well employed in the local courts, Hania felt she had to proceed. Similarly, Alia, another interlocutor, had been persuaded to marry her cousin, who was not religious, due to a lack of other suitable options.

While some women are compelled to make marital decisions that sit uneasily with their religious goals, many others turn to Islam precisely as a solution to the difficulties or delays they encounter in their marriages. In accounts of how and when they decided to come to *dars* or became more observant, a broken engagement or general delays in getting married are often cited as a triggering reason. The centrality of marriage in establishing social and economic security for women, not to mention the social taboo and lack of support (Javaid 2019a), means that few see divorce as an option when faced with an unhappy alliance. In such situations, many find both solace and distraction in cultivating Islamic virtues. Tania and Kaukab, whose stories I turn towards later, had started attending Qur'an school in the face of marital difficulties – the former's husband had an extramarital affair and the latter's spouse had a long-standing drug addiction that ultimately led to his demise. Attending *dars* gatherings and seeking advice from and counsel of Qur'an teachers offered them not only a sense of solidarity but also hope for a different future from their present. For all these interlocutors, as with many others I encountered, marriage represents another form of becoming that offers new possibilities, both merging and conflicting with pious aspirations. Concepts of time and destiny, towards which I now turn, play an important role in how these tensions are mediated.

### Destiny, openness, and time

One day, as she reflected on how she has changed over the years, Sameen said, 'People assume that faith is standard, unchanging, but that is not the case'. She had a graduate degree in economics and, true to her training, drew me a graph when I said I did not understand her meaning. 'Look here', she said, labelling the vertical axis 'faith' and the horizontal 'time', 'this dot is you'. Pointing towards a point in the middle of the graph, she elaborated, 'You don't stay the same as time goes on, you either move up or down'. Recent studies on destiny have highlighted its 'malleable fixity' (Elliot & Menin 2018; Homola 2018), which lends life both certainty and a preordained limit, and an uncertainty about when this truth will reveal itself and how it will interact with human actions and strategies. This unknowability often produces a 'labour of hope' and 'anticipated actions' to help realize the future (Elliot 2016) or to thwart and manipulate its intended course (Elliot & Menin 2018; Homola 2018). For my interlocutors, alongside a 'labour of hope', uncertainty about the future that destiny holds for them is also a cause of unease. Both these aspects – hope and trepidation – are present in Sameen's graph, which suggests an ambivalence about the impact of the passage of time on a person.

Destiny, as others have also noted, 'reveals itself with and through time' (Elliot & Menin 2018: 295; see also Homola 2018; Palmié & Stewart 2016). As depicted in



Sameen's graph, time carries possibilities both for becoming and for the unravelling of plans and aspirations. At the time Sameen made this graph for me, her tone was almost rueful, as we had been discussing how she was not as actively engaged in Qur'anic learning as before. But when she was getting married, the uncertainties of time and destiny, and how they could transform a person, had also held promise. She had seen Ali as someone with an 'open heart' and had hopes that perhaps, with time, Allah would turn him towards Islam. In similar vein, after accepting the proposal, Hania had planned that she would help her husband's family become more observant by reading the Qur'an to them every morning and encouraging them to pray. As I discuss later, although there were changes over time, neither Hania's nor Sameen's plans worked quite as they had imagined. Uncertainty created an open-endedness about the future that allowed them to hope, even as they feared that this might be the beginning of an unravelling.

Sameen's remarks reflect both a sense of individual responsibility for cultivating piety and an acceptance – reluctantly so – that not everything is within human control. In her pivotal work on the mosque movement in Cairo, Mahmood (2001; 2005) urges us to think of forms of agency that lie outside of liberal contexts and, especially, are centred not on resisting but operating within structures of power and authority. In other words, she highlights that the desire to cultivate piety and a state of submission reflects a form of agency concerned with inhabiting norms. Mahmood's intervention is largely focused on challenging the universalizing assumption, stemming from liberal political theory, of agency as resistance, but it can be extended to explore forms of agency that, as Mittermaier puts it, 'are centred neither on acting against or acting within' (2012: 252) structures of power. Mittermaier's interlocutors are acted upon by the 'Elsewhere': a believer can only invite or prepare for a divinatory dream, but it is not within their control whether or when it will come to them. Sameen's belief in individual responsibility to maintain piety reflects a desire for submission, but her rueful acceptance makes her different from the 'self-contained' subjects (Mittermaier 2011: 5) whom Mahmood (2001; 2005) talks of who intentionally cultivate themselves and achieve their intended state. Sameen's remarks hint that, despite best intentions and efforts, people are not always able to follow their intended paths. Her words point towards an openness of self, a sense that agency and action are not always within the domain of human control, and instead depend on the metaphysical realm.

An attitude of 'openness' and acceptance of being 'acted upon' are common in everyday life in Pakistan. Within pious circles, irrespective of denominational leanings, there is a widespread belief that although it is incumbent on all to attempt closeness with Allah, only those who are destined for this connection will succeed. The sense that not all is within human control also plays into the actions and fears of those who may not be particularly religious, and nor is it limited to matters of religiosity. In fact, it is particularly noticeable in matters of romance and marriage. Even as they practise a 'labour of hope' by entering and encouraging romances with men they think are eligible husbands, many women worry about what the future holds for their relationship. While such concerns often make people try to seek knowledge of the future, by doing an *istikhāra*, for instance, many also avoid it in case it reveals that the match is undesirable.<sup>5</sup> The limitations of human control are also visible in processes around arranged marriages, and the uncertain directions that life courses take are accepted as destiny, locally referred to as *qismet* or *nasīb*. As in other Muslim contexts, even as they run careful background checks on prospective spouses and their families, everyone insists that, ultimately, conjugal and marriage futures depend on destiny (see

Schielke 2015*b*: 202). In most upwardly mobile households, there is increasing space for premarital communication (especially over the phone) between intended spouses, and such actions are at times even encouraged. Yet many of the women I became acquainted with chose to have limited contact, arguing that since the course that the union would take depended on their *qismet*, there was little point in getting to know someone now and that it could wait until after marriage.

References to destiny here can be read as used as a euphemism for making the best out of limited choices. As Schielke writes (2015*b*: 203), freedom is often absent from the language of destiny. Certainly, given the high stakes of marriage, less communication before the wedding reduces the chances of any misunderstanding that may lead to it being called off. Given the larger expectation for women to ‘adjust’ (Uberoi & Tyagi 1994) to the demands of their new homes, many feel that they may as well delay getting to know their husbands-to-be. For my interlocutors, as for women from upwardly mobile backgrounds generally, there is sometimes no option but to accept the cards laid out for them – succinctly put by Alia, when explaining her decision to accept her cousin’s proposal, ‘This was my *qismet*, there was nothing else to do’.

Viewing this attitude as a kind of fatalistic acceptance, however, does not capture the richness of possibilities that emerge with an ‘openness’ towards time and the work that it does on selves and others. An attitude of ‘openness’ is used to negotiate the absence of any significant freedom and choice, simultaneously calling for an acceptance of the inevitable while opening the potentiality of change in the future. Going back to Sameen’s example, the very same ‘openness’ that she had feared was making her less pious had also given her reason to think that her husband would change over time. The work of time, manifested in the act of *sabar*, is a relational space where individual agency and predestined futures intersect with the presence, influence, and destinies of others.

### ***Sabar*, agency, and change**

The ‘labour of hope’ (Elliot 2016) in the marriages of my interlocutors involved the practice of *sabar*, described by Das as a ‘shadowing of time’, acting more ‘like a stalker than a rebel’ (2007: 87). This is certainly how Alia behaved when faced with difficulties in the initial years of her marriage. She had married her cousin – while her own nuclear family were very observant, with all the women veiling, her husband’s family were what she described as ‘liberal’. The marriage had taken place in the aftermath of an altercation between Alia’s father and her aunt; to assure her brother of her affection towards him, the sister had wanted her son to marry his daughter. Even though Alia never said this, I suspect that the heart of the altercation was that the family was struggling to find a suitor for Alia and the father was upset that the sister was not offering her son. Her husband had not wanted to marry a religious girl but felt obligated to listen to his mother. Soon after the wedding, he demanded that she stop veiling. He told her that that he had ‘married a woman, not a *maulana*’<sup>6</sup> and that he had no interest in a wife who looked like one.

Alia resented his demand, but, partly afraid that he might ask her to leave otherwise and partly out of a sense of duty, she acquiesced. ‘Keeping your husband happy keeps Allah happy; the Qur’an tells women to abide her husband’, she told me as she elaborated on how she slowly got used to going out in public without a veil. Alia admitted that, on occasion, she would get upset and fight with her husband, but overall she silently agreed to his demands, all the while praying to Allah for something to change. Similarly, Hania’s husband would get annoyed when she asked him to observe the five-time daily



prayers and was dismissive of her religious sensibilities. After a while, she stopped saying anything and quietly went about her daily tasks. 'I would feel so annoyed', she told me, 'but I never let anyone see it, doing all the housework, [getting his clothes] always pressed and ready'.

The women quietly complied with all the demands upon them, but their silence also afforded them access to spaces of selected privacy, part of the 'practical logic of kinship' (Das 2007) that allowed for a maintenance of religious difference. For instance, Sameen's in-laws regularly held *milād* gatherings commemorating the Prophet that she personally considered *bidat* (innovation) but did not want to offend anyone by refusing to attend. Whenever there was a *milād* in the house, Sameen would come up with an elaborate reason not to attend: for instance, that her infant son was unwell or that she herself was ill. She reckoned that others probably knew what she was doing but her mother-in-law would always accept her excuses and never said anything. Such forms of accommodating differences are possible only if they do not upset established hierarchies and authority in the household.

The quiet waiting of *sabar* opens such spaces, but it does not end there. It is also underpinned by a hopeful expectation that *sabar* will result in something. Although the rewards of any act that pleases Allah can be meted out in this life or in the hereafter, much of the focus in Islamic discourses and discussions, especially in relation to suffering, is on the latter. Amongst my informants, although no one denied that this world is of no significance compared to the one that awaits, the emphasis was very much on this life, right now. '*Sabar* can soften even a heart of stone', Hania would frequently say to me, and, similarly, Alia often mentioned 'witnessing the *sabar* of someone else can affect the other ... it can create an immense impact'. Other interlocutors, too, would talk of the unpredictable and surprising ways in which Allah could reward *sabar*. In this sense, the waiting of *sabar* is not passive. Instead, it is charged with anticipation, much like the uncertainty of return described by Bourdieu (1990: 98), even if the form, shape, and timing of it remain unknown.

The practice of *sabar* emerges here neither as active self-cultivation through submission, as Mahmood (2001; 2005) has argued, nor as an autonomous agency of individual self-interest. Neither does it fully fit with Mittermaier's (2011; 2012) orientation towards the Elsewhere as, even though it extends beyond ethical self-cultivation and beckons to divine agency, it remains very much tethered to worldly relationships and interactions. To take a cue from Qureshi's work on chronic illness and care among British Pakistani women, where she deploys Mattingly's concept of 'moral laboratory', *sabar* is not simply about 'internal efforts' but is in play with 'something more external, more inter-subjective, the world of social action' (Qureshi 2018: 206). Qureshi's interlocutors actively cultivated *sabar*, viewing their suffering as both a test from Allah and a path for achieving greater closeness to Him. Yet, in the 'long haul of the everyday' (Qureshi 2018: 205), they also expected and yearned for some acknowledgement and recognition of their suffering. *Sabar*, Qureshi argues, represents a form of moral and ethical becoming where 'habitable routines are experimented with, invented and revised in response to challenging circumstances' (2018: 206).

There are similar entanglements here between efforts directed towards the self and those oriented outwards. While Qureshi's interlocutors look towards others for recognition, the women in my ethnography strive for self-transformation in and through others. But even as they anticipate and hope that their self-cultivation elicits a response in and from human and nonhuman actors, they deny their own agency when

it does occur. There is a simultaneous acknowledgement and effacement of the self. In the six years since they got married and Alia was told to stop veiling, her husband's own preferences and ideas started changing. Making frequent use of the expression '*waqt ke sāth*', literally meaning 'with time', she explained how her husband slowly started to become more religious and, presently, prayed regularly and even sported a beard. Alia had been praying all these years for him to change, saying to Allah that He had to save her from becoming distant from Him and to give her a way. Meanwhile, she kept trying to educate her husband on Islam, showing him clips of sermons and reminding him of the temporariness of this world, efforts that – it seemed at the time – he largely dismissed. She found unexpected support in her mother-in-law, who had been once inclined towards Islam but had not lived up to her aspirations. She was sympathetic towards Alia, often chiding her son for not listening to his wife. Meanwhile, the market where her husband owned a shop started to be frequented by members of the faith renewal movement Tablighi Jamaat who preached Islam.

In describing these events, Alia was both at the centre of this narrative of change yet at the same time not directly responsible. '*Waqt ne apnā khel dikhaya*' (time showed its hand), she reflected. 'Perhaps this was my husband's destiny; Allah wanted this for him'. Later, she turned to her own waiting and forbearance: 'Maybe my *sabar* softened his heart and opened it for learning'. In later conversations, she mentioned the forbearance of her mother-in-law, and reflected on whether she was rewarded for the trials she had faced. Alia's account acknowledges her efforts yet at the same time effaces them, pointing towards an uncertainty about who acted on whom and why. Her own efforts become diffused with those of others: was it her prayers and *sabar* that Allah answered or had this always been predestined from her husband? Was it her in-laws' own histories that prompted this change or her own *sabar*? There is an acknowledgement of, even a certain pride about, what she has accomplished, but there is also a deflection of responsibility towards human and nonhuman others. In other words, agency is embedded in a network of relations that presents itself over time.

### Personhood and the work of time

It can be argued that the displacement of agency that I have described points towards the gendered limitations on asserting an autonomous self, as also noted by Mody in India (2008: 52) and Spencer in Sri Lanka (1997: 705). This, of course, has relevance especially given that there are few roles and positions that women can occupy in South Asia where the dominant model of virtue is not of silent suffering and self-sacrifice. However, what I am suggesting here is a form of self-making and personhood that is open to acting upon and being acted on by human and nonhuman divine others (cf. Spencer 1997). It speaks of a mode of action and existence where the individual is decentred and multiple forms of agency converge (Mittermaier 2011), but where personal aspirations are not always forgotten. In the larger waiting for and anticipation of change induced through the actions of others, contingencies and external events take on special significance, and are 'seized upon to impose one's own vision of truth' (Das 2007: 85) and aspirations for the self.

Much to her disappointment, Sameen's husband took little notice of the emphasis she placed on the daily rituals that, in her eyes, were an integral part of Muslim family life. Three years ago, he was posted to a small town while Sameen and their two young children continued to live in the joint family. Away from his young family, he began to

realize that it is difficult to impart moral guidance to children without them following from example and watching others. 'My husband was always about the meaning behind things and did not give importance to the act of prayer', Sameen said, 'but being away from us, and with young children, he realized that all these abstract things mean nothing to kids; they get attached and exposed to religion through the ritual'. To have more influence in his children's life, he started to pray more regularly, especially in front of them. 'He started wanting to have more of a presence in their lives, that they should copy and follow him', she said, 'so he prays in front of them so that they watch and do the same'. For Sameen, this change in her husband (caused through the contingency of an out-of-city transfer), and for Alia, the appearance of a faith renewal movement at her husband's shop, present themselves as fleeting opportunities to take up and assert their own hopes and desires in a marriage. This is the work of time in married life; as Das argues, time is 'not purely represented', but is an agent 'that works on relationships, allowing them to be interpreted, rewritten, scratched over, as different social actors struggle to author stories' (2007: 67).

The work of time provides possibilities to carve out individual and married futures, rewriting and crossing out older histories and weaving new narratives of self-making and of bringing change in others. In contrast to Sameen's linear depiction of faith in her graph, the practice of *sabar* involves multiple notions of time and temporality. In the narratives of *sabar*, time is suspended as women wait for change and in the capacity of their patience to erase previous histories and shape new paths. And when change does occur, it often connects older events – Alia's mother-in-law's desire for pious living, for instance – with contemporary happenings and new potentialities. The past, present, and future exist simultaneously in these moments. Akin to Das's (2010) account of histories and relations across generations being drawn upon as couples negotiate differences in the present, differing temporalities coexist and bear upon ordinary occurrences in the everyday of marital life. The practice of *sabar* challenges progressive assumptions of time in that, although its direction is hopeful, it is unpredictable and does not necessarily depend on actions within one's control. Such a notion of time both centres and decentres the individual: on the one hand, emphasizing the self-responsibility to cultivate *sabar* and, on the other, dispelling the notion that the individual is at the seat of choice and action.

Being open to being acted upon by others leaves a person exposed to the work and designs of others over time. Ever since Alia's husband has become more pious, he no longer stops her from veiling. Alia often tells me that she will soon restart; although in the four years I have known her, she has not made any attempt. Once when we were talking about her son's schooling, she told me that when she goes to collect him, she notices how all the other mothers are dressed. 'Everyone is *tip top*, they all look *modern*, how will my son feel when his mother is in a *burqā*?' She immediately explains that this is not something that will stop her from veiling in the future, but she does reflect on it in relation to her husband's life. He had also gone to a school where very few children came from families that veiled, and his circle of friends were not conservative. When he demanded that she stop veiling, he had spoken of how he did not want to feel cut away from his social networks. Alia had been dismissive then but, speaking of her son and how he would feel in school, she remembered her husband's feelings. It was as if time had worked to bring his vision to the forefront and changed some of Alia's own aspirations. Meanwhile, Hania's persistent continuation of daily tasks of care and household work did perhaps soften the heart, for her husband began to give greater credence to saints

and *Sufis* – often taking her to visit shrines and also paying his respects. But in the daily rhythms of the household, she herself became more lax in her prayers. ‘I had planned that I would change all of them,’ she said, ‘but living with them, I, too, have become lazy’. Hania felt bad about these changes in herself and wondered if ‘this was my destiny’. ‘Perhaps,’ she said when we had last met, ‘something will happen with time that will change all of us’.

### The ambivalence of *sabar*

The unpredictability of *sabar*, however, is such that the manner of the change and its timing can catch a person by surprise. It can transform them so drastically that their past wishes, desires, and life become unrecognizable to them. This is what happened to Tania in the aftermath of her husband’s infidelity. They had been married for ten years when Tania found out that he was having an affair and wanted to leave her to marry the other woman. Devastated by his betrayal and worried about her two children’s future, she was beside herself, unsure where to turn. She was not very religious at the time, although she had always looked with interest at the Qur’an school near her children’s school and had thought she would visit it one day. In the weeks after learning of the affair, she would often drive around mindlessly after dropping her children off at school and, one day, found herself at the Qur’an school. Her visits there became regular; at first, they were largely therapeutic as the teachers and students there listened to her and offered solace, but later she started attending classes.

Tania would worry and cry all the time. She did not want to leave her husband and return to her parents’ home, partially because she did not want to become a burden on them. Her father had offered his support, but Tania had been conscious that it was her brother who was the main contributor to household expenses and that his wife would not welcome her addition. ‘As your parents age, it is no longer their house, and you are beholden to your brother and his wife. It’s her [brother’s wife] house and you are a guest, better to be miserable but at least be in your own house’. Tania also held out hope that her husband would leave the other woman and love her again. She told me that she was desperate for their life to go back to how it was. The teachers at the Qur’an school, in line with their views on the sanctity of marriage, advised her against divorce and to try her best to avoid it. They encouraged her to practise *sabar*, and to not respond to any of her husband’s demands for a divorce, but just to quietly go about her daily work and look after their children and house. Tania followed this advice as best as she could; she suppressed her anger and tears when her husband disappeared for hours and never asked him where he had been. When he brought up divorcing, she would remain quiet or tell him to think about the children. All this while, she prayed day and night, asking Allah for strength and for her husband to come back to her.

After a year of living like this, Tania got her wish. Not only did the affair end but also her husband began to regret the hurt he had caused his family. He begged Tania to forgive him, which she did, but she no longer felt the happiness and satisfaction she had thought she would feel at his return. Thinking about the time, she said, ‘One thing I realized [in her religious journey] is that in moments of great distress and pain you stand alone in front of Allah; there is no one, it is just you’. It is this knowledge, entrenched in her through *sabar* she practised in the face of all the hurt and indignity, that has transformed how she feels about many of the things that previously mattered to her. ‘I am happy that my husband is back and that he is with us [her and the children], and I know that his sorrow over what happened is genuine’, Tania admitted, ‘but I no longer

feel the same pleasure from my married life as I once did'. She tried to look after her husband, her children, and her home as she used to but her main focus these days was her relationship with Allah, which she cultivated through daily prayers and reading the Qur'an. When she confided in a teacher at the Qur'an school that there were times when she felt irritated by her husband's demands on her time, she was told that it was part of her duty as a Muslim to lead a fulfilling family life. 'Some days, I think, who was that woman two years ago?', she said, as she thought of how she had changed. 'Perhaps, with time, I will feel differently [about my marriage]'.

The work of time, here, is relational, giving Tania what she had desired in that her husband returned to their family. But it also acted on her in the process, bringing about an internal transformation and a new sense of purpose, so much so that she no longer felt satisfied in her family life. Agency, her experience reminds us, is not the same as control for *sabar* opens a person to unexpected outcomes and change. In other words, *sabar* draws a person into the influence of others, whether it is the past experiences and habits of spouses and family members or Allah's will. For my interlocutors, *sabar* is closely entwined with individual aspirations but it is also about opening themselves to and accepting Allah's plans for them. This, as Tania's ambivalence about her situation suggests, sometimes sits uncomfortably with individual aspirations and intentionality – both of which are not absent in understandings of the self – but is recognized as part of being acted upon. The work of time, then, is as much about the interpretation of events as it is about their occurrence – an aspect that I draw out more through the following story.

While time had worked an intense transformation on Tania, it felt that change had perhaps come too late for Kaukab. Married to a distant cousin, Kaukab had an unhappy marriage and had blamed everyone around her for the state of affairs. Her husband had a drug addiction, which his family was aware of but had never mentioned when arranging the marriage. When Kaukab found out, a couple of months after the wedding, she – understandably – felt betrayed both by his family for not disclosing his addiction and by her own for not finding out more about the groom. Angry and bitter about the situation she found herself in, Kaukab frequently fought with her husband and locked herself in her room for hours to avoid seeing him or other members of the joint family with whom they resided. One evening, almost a year into their marriage, her mother-in-law banged on her door, imploring her to come out and see her husband, who, she said, had come home semi-conscious and looked dangerously unwell. Kaukab ignored her pleas, assuming that it was just another attempt to get them to talk and instead went to sleep. She was woken up a few hours later by more banging on the door and given the horrific news that her husband had passed away. In the months that followed, Kaukab was overcome with grief and feelings of guilt. She would spend her days sitting listlessly in the same spot for hours. Eventually, with the encouragement of a family friend, she turned towards prayer as a way of finding solace. When I met her, two years since her husband had died, she was enrolled in a course at a Qur'an school.

'My husband was not a bad man ... he was kind ... and he had needed strength', Kaukab reflected, as she recounted her life story. 'He had even told me several times that he needed my support to get out of this habit, but I was too angry to listen,' she said, with regret. She felt that if, instead of being angry, she had helped him, then he could have perhaps overcome his addiction. It was only now that she understood that the answer to her predicament had been *sabar*, not bitterness. She was filled with sadness that she had

not come out of her room and that he died thinking she did not even care enough to see him. She no longer felt angry with her family for choosing such a life for her and, in fact, told me of how the support of both her and her deceased husband's relatives gave her enormous strength. Instead, she thought of the marriage as her destiny (*nasīb*), and that it perhaps could have had a different outcome had she acted differently and with *sabar*. But although she always talked of *sabar* as the best recourse for her predicament, her feelings about what it entailed and the promise it held for the future revealed a sense of ambivalence.

One day, we started discussing how becoming close to Allah had helped Kaukab in understanding her loss. Speaking of how He could transform a life in a matter of minutes, she suddenly fell silent and I saw that her eyes were filled with tears. Wanting to comfort her, I said that perhaps her life would change for the better in the future. She shrugged in response, and said, 'Yes, perhaps ... but what is the point of change coming now, when so much has been lost?' I was not certain whether she was referring to the future or meant that the change in her had come too late to change her past. And neither could I tell whether her next comment referred to the state of all humans in relation to Allah's plans or to her own position, of a young widow living with her in-laws: 'What is there for us to do but do *sabar*?' When we spoke about this again, she only talked of *sabar* as a way of living as we waited and prayed for Allah to reveal His best plans for us. In the face of ambivalence of what life has to offer, *sabar* is almost akin to a postponement or buying of time. Kaukab's struggle in coming to terms with what had happened suggests that agency lies not just in the passage of time but also in what is revealed and how that is interpreted over a life course. Interpreting life events and changes as part of one's destiny and learning from them opens possibilities for taking charge of a narrative and carving out a purposeful life.

In pursuing these arguments on openness to time, my intention is not to offer an intellectualized version of, or an apology for, the gendered expectation in Pakistan of women to accept their lot in life without complaint. Nor is to normalize the patriarchal demand for submissiveness. Instead, my aim has been to draw out, in a social world of unequal power relations and limited choices, the possibilities that exist and are taken up to build a life. Far from being passive, an opiate in the Marxian sense that it quells dissent, *sabar* is active and charged with an anticipation of change, even as the shape and timing of it remain unpredictable. In the stories and perspectives shared here, time – articulated through *sabar* – is multifaceted, talked of sometimes in linear terms but often experienced differently. Chance events, contingencies, interpreted through the lens of destiny, lend to the agency of *sabar* and provide moments that can be seized to rewrite the past and to, as Das puts it, 'author one's own story' (2007: 67).

*Sabar* as a non-liberal form of agency reveals a complex interplay between self and relationality. Although focused on and requiring individual self-cultivation and, in this respect, about developing a unique relationship with Allah, it is not confined to 'wilful submission' (Mahmood 2001; 2005). In its acceptance of being 'acted upon' (Mittermaier 2011; 2012), it reveals an openness of self, not just to divine agency but also to the work of time. *Sabar* is undergirded by a larger trust in an ethics of waiting, a form of self-making that seeks to carve an individual future and narrative, but through and with the presence of others, and with an acknowledgement that these outcomes are



never predictable or within human control. In other words, an attention to *sabar* is a reminder that in order to understand how a person carves out a meaningful life in a world where they have limited control, we need to decentre the individual as the seat of action.

### Acknowledgements

My research was 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). Earlier versions of my argument were presented in 2019–20 at a workshop hosted by the project ‘A Global Anthropology of Transforming Marriage’ at the University of Edinburgh, the American Anthropological Association Annual Conference at Vancouver, the Social Anthropology Department seminar at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and, in 2022, the Anthropology Department seminar at the University of Sussex and the Social Anthropology Department seminar at University College London. I am grateful for the generative discussions at these venues. I want to thank the anonymous reviewers and the Editors at the *JRAI* for their close engagement with my work. I am especially indebted to Janet Carsten, Kaveri Qureshi, Leslie Fesenmyer, and Giulia Liberatore for their comments on various stages of the draft. I want to also acknowledge the childcare support of Agnola Batha, without which it would have been impossible to write this article. Above all, thanks are due to my interlocutors, for their openness, time, and generosity in sharing their lives with me. Any shortcomings are entirely my own.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, I have used pseudonyms for people and also changed some identifying details. My interlocutors spoke in Urdu, Punjabi, and English. English words used in otherwise Urdu sentences have been italicized. All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For similar considerations in other contexts, see Nolte (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Although women do not make any economic contribution to the household, the duty of maintaining social relations within the family falls upon them, which, given the centrality of kin support, is important ‘work’, although no one ever calls it that. One of the reasons why women are reluctant to work outside the house is that they do not want the double burden of a financial contribution as well as these duties (see Javaid 2019b).

<sup>4</sup> In scholarship on Sunni Islam, *fiqh* refers to the four schools of jurisprudence: Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, and Hanbali. In Pakistan, most people belong to Hanafi *fiqh* but use the term to refer to denominations within them – particularly Deobandi and Barelwi.

<sup>5</sup> *Istikhara* is a prayer recited to ask for divine advice on a decision, which is revealed in a dream vision.

<sup>6</sup> *Maulana* denotes a male Muslim scholar but is sometimes used derogatorily to refer to anyone perceived as too conservative.

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## L'œuvre du temps : personne, agencéité et négociation de la différence dans les couples mariés des villes du Pakistan

### Résumé

Quelle est l'œuvre du temps dans un mariage ? Comment transforme-t-il des gens qui s'efforcent de changer et de laisser des traces chez les autres ? Au travers de réflexions sur des femmes de classe moyenne pakistanaises mariées à des hommes qui ne partageaient pas leurs aspirations religieuses, l'auteur étudie la manière dont la différence est négociée et appréhendée dans ces mariages, ainsi que ses conséquences inattendues sur les attitudes religieuses des deux époux. L'œuvre du temps, formulée par le concept de *sabar* (patience, tolérance), apparaît comme une toile de fond d'une confluence d'interventions, d'influences et de motivations humaines et non humaines qui exige que l'on ne pense l'agencéité individuelle ni comme l'action autonome théorisée dans la pensée libérale traditionnelle, ni comme la soumission volontaire formulée dans les contextes islamiques. L'agencéité, en tant que capacité d'affirmer ses visions et ses espoirs personnels, dépend plutôt de la malléabilité et de l'ouverture au temps des personnes, qui laisse celles et ceux qui souhaitent que les autres changent ouverts, eux aussi, à la transformation.

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