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## **Uncoupling beyond the couple: a British South Asian Muslim relational negotiation of divorce**

### **ABSTRACT**

Through analysis of the narratives of one British South Asian Muslim woman contemplating divorce, this paper explores how the termination of marriage is negotiated within families. The paper charts the involvement and implicatedness of multiple family members in the decision at multiple levels – the interpersonal: via involvement as sounding boards, advisors and mediators – and the intersubjective: as people’s sense of their own internal will or resolve to divorce is dialogical and unstably tied to others’ expressed views. The negotiation of divorce is an agentic intervention in the re-ordering of relationships and sheds light on wider processes linking agency, culture and belief. Whilst these multiple levels of the relational negotiation of divorce may be particularly piqued in South Asian contexts, there are wider implications for sociology as, contra individualization theory, uncoupling is shown to involve more than the feelings and choices of just the husband and wife.

### **KEY WORDS**

British South Asian Muslims, divorce, relationality, family mediation, intersubjectivity

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper, analysing the narratives of one British South Asian Muslim woman contemplating divorce, reflects on how the termination of marriage is negotiated within families. As Bob Simpson (1998) has argued, rather than ending relationships between a separating couple, divorce re-orders these relationships, and the relationships amongst a whole set of other family members too. To date, the focus of sociological attention has been on the re-ordering of kinship in the wake of divorce –former spouses’ deliberations over the relationships they should have with their ex’s new step-children (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2003; Allan et al. 2011). However, a key aspect of this re-ordering process that requires further attention is actually the role of kinship relations in the initial

decision to terminate the marriage. This paper charts the involvement and implicatedness of family members in the decision to divorce at multiple levels – both the *interpersonal*: through family members' involvement as sounding boards, advisors and mediators – and the *intersubjective*: as people's sense of their own internal will or resolve to divorce is dialogical and unstably tied to others' expressed views. Whilst these levels of the relational negotiation of divorce may be explicit in South Asian contexts, we suggest that there are broader implications for family sociology.

The context of British South Asian Muslim families seems to raise particularly piqued insights to the relational negotiation of the decision to divorce. In the literature on Euro-American contexts, the conjugal bond tends to be highly emphasized. The presumption is that uncoupling involves primarily the choices and feelings of the husband and wife. Whilst sociologists have attended to divorcing parents' considerations about the impacts of marriage breakdown on their children (Smart and Neale 1999), the parents of divorcing adults seldom feature in this literature, aside from studies in the context of their role as grandparents in picking up the pieces for their adult children and grandchildren in the aftermath of divorce (e.g. Ferguson et al. 2004; Smart 2005). But in South Asian contexts, the role of wider kin has been an explicit focus, including observations of extensive attempts at family mediation. There has been much debate about how kinship systems and caste/community affiliations may shape women's recourse to natal kin support (Karve 1993; Vera-Sanso 1999; Jeffery 2001). Recently, Shalini Grover (2011) has questioned more fundamentally whether parental refuge supports women's exercise of power in their marriages. She shows that kinship support is extended only to women in arranged marriages, and not to women in 'love marriages', who choose their own partners and are therefore deemed responsible for the consequences. Grover stresses the 'double-edged' character of kinship support (p.74). Women do not always put trust in their natal kin. They consider kinship support to be temporary and shallow, as when they seek parental refuge, their natal kin make them well aware of the strains and social stigma created by their presence, causing humiliation and distress.

Similar debates abound in the literature on South Asian diasporas in the UK, where we have worked. Family mediation has been analysed here too as 'double-edged'. The British South Asian Muslim women interviewed by Bano (2012) expected family mediation and actively claimed it as the benefit of having had an arranged marriage. Yet equally, they reported pressure to stay in the marriage from their families, and thus 'what at first seemed like a new space of dialogue and autonomy in the family could, in some cases, still depend upon the traditional framework of power' (p.198). Studies of women exiting abusive marriages even find that 'the pressure exerted by family members superseded the pressure from husbands to return or stay with them' (Ahmed et al. 2009, p.18).

If women turning to their families for help are refused and pressured to stay in the marriage, the option of divorce is strongly disinclined (Metlo 2012). The initial literature on divorce in South Asian diasporas found that domestic abuse seemed to be an inordinately common reason for marital breakdown (Sinha 1998; Jhutti 1998; Shah-Kazemi 2001; Guru 2009; Das 2011; Bano 2012). It was assumed that, because of the broader disapproval of divorce, domestic abuse was one of the few situations in which women would insist on divorce (Hassouneh-Philips 2001; Thiara et al. 2010; Chaudhuri et al. 2014). However, divorces in South Asian diasporas are underpinned not only by situations of domestic abuse, but also by marital expectations that have been shown to be not static and monolithic but local, intersectionally-inflected 'cultural scripts' (Mehrotra 2016), entailing agential, embodied experiences of sexuality and reproduction (Majumdar 2007) and a certain degree of acceptance of a growing individualisation in relationship-making (Ahmad 2012).

Today, divorce is on the rise among British South Asians. In the mid-1990s, only 4% of ever-married British Asians were divorced or separated, compared to 9% of White British adults and 18% of Black Caribbean adults (Berthoud 2000, p.6 and p.16). Berthoud described British Asians as 'behind' in the path of social change 'from old-fashioned values to modern individualism' (p.24) and predicted that

‘the very strong emphasis on a particular set of family standards in Islamic teachings may mean that change will be slower among Muslims than among Sikhs and Hindus’ (p.23). But twenty years on, the data suggest an alternative analysis. By 2010–13, roughly 10% of ever-married Pakistani Muslim, Bangladeshi Muslim and Indian Sikh adults were separated or divorced, whilst for Indian Hindus and Muslims there had been less change (Qureshi 2016, p.3-5). There are many questions about why divorce may be more common in some British South Asian communities than others, but certainly, the prevalence of separation and divorce in Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim populations suggests that blanket assumptions about the conservatism of British Muslims are unsustainable, whilst the lesser prevalence of divorce in British Indian Muslims shows that religious affiliation is not the only differentiating factor. Our own research has challenged the assumption that increased divorce is a sign of British South Asians falling into the march of White British families. Rather, increased divorce reflects a ‘palimpsest’ of social change (Qureshi 2016, p.306). Traditions such as arranged marriage may be upheld, whilst also combined with new elements, such as the insistence on love and intimacy and the willingness to end a marriage if this is not forthcoming (Qureshi 2016, p.88-94). People’s understandings of tradition may also change, as with the changing stance we have documented concerning religion, and a turn to textual interpretations of Islam that are seen as offering women certain rights within a universalistic framework of gender complementarity, including clearly defined grounds for divorce (Qureshi et al. 2014; Qureshi 2018). Different elements may be important to people at different junctures in their lives, as for example with those women who compromise in their own unhappy marriages, but later urge their daughters to divorce (Qureshi 2016, p.102-112).

These findings suggest some resonances with the claims of individualization theorist Giddens (1993), who did emphasize the extent to which the increased insistence on intimacy was driven by women’s demands for equality with their partners. But this scholarship also implies that, to understand the moral reasonings undergirding British South Asian divorces, individualization theory may not be the best place to start. In their work on post-divorce lives in England, feminist sociologists Smart and

Neale (1999) have rightly asked whether there is some masculinist bias to Giddens' depictions of 'pure relationships' sustained only as far as they deliver satisfactions for each person to stay in them, before persons unencumbered by responsibilities for or the considerations of others moves on and forms another. They show that the decisions that divorcees make, for example, whether to re-partner or not, are not just about themselves and their own desires or needs, but are taken attending to a web of relationships. In her later sociology of 'personal life', Smart (2007) has conceived of this approach as 'relational'. She develops this concept as capturing the very substantial roles that relationships with significant others play in people's reasoning about key decisions. The term relationism 'conjures up the image of people existing within intentional, thoughtful networks, which they actively sustain, maintain or allow to atrophy' (p.48). Relationality 'it is not just a state of mind, it requires action' (p.49).

Recently however, Roseneil and Ketokivi (2016) have critiqued this notion of relationality, offering theoretical groundings that help break open the presumption – present even in Smart's work – that relationality tunes in to relationships between persons who are pre-given, bounded entities.

Roseneil and Ketokivi offer three alternative sociological and psychoanalytic frames that capture the *emergence* of the self, too, as inherently relational. The first, which seems highly illuminating in a sociological context, and further elaborates Roseneil and Ketokivi's differences with Carol Smart, is George Herbert Mead's (1934) work on the 'social self'. When Mead distinguishes between the 'I' and 'me', these are not alternative ways of looking at the self, flicking between the lenses of individualization theory or the sociology of personal life (cf. Smart 2007). Roseneil and Ketokivi explain that 'to be social requires both aspects, the "I" and the "me" – that are different phases of the same process called "the self" (p.147). Indeed, the 'I' who acts beyond habits and social expectations is reflected upon only as a memory image after immediate action, and the 'I' is also the 'me' who is the person's self-image when they look at themselves through the eyes of others – first the eyes of particular significant others, and then those of the 'generalised other'. Roseneil and

Ketokivi argue that Mead enables us to 'theorize the moments when a person actively intervenes and contributes to the dynamic unfolding and transformation of their relationships', which has been understood in the sociology of personal life in terms of negotiation, in terms of the 'agentic reflexivity of the relational person' (p.147-8).

Developing these insights, we turn to earlier work by Holland et al. (2001), which takes similar inspiration from Mead and opens up precisely this question of agentic reflexivity. They take from Mead's 'sociogenic' concept of personhood a framework for how 'self-consciousness and self-reflection develop... as a product of a social history' (p.4). They focus on how people imaginatively objectify themselves as agents who can 'act purposively' on the world (p.41). These objectifications of possible selves-in-practice are rehearsed in imagined dialogue with 'internal interlocutors' (p.179). Thus 'inner speech' is 'a key intra-mental node, where social speech penetrate[s] the body and bec[omes] the premiere building block of thought and feeling' (p.175). Their emphasis is on self-process as dialogical, as we represent ourselves to ourselves from the vantage point (the words) of others, and those representations become significant to our experience of ourselves (p.172).

In what follows, we draw on these Meadian-inspired perspectives to develop arguments about the relational negotiation of decisions through analysis of the narratives of one woman, Nusrat, whose protracted contemplation of divorce offers insights to the agentic intervention in the re-ordering of relationships and highlights the intersubjective, as well as the interpersonal aspects of relationality. We will draw out how one woman's anguish, as she grappled with the decision to divorce, can shed light on wider processes linking agency, culture and belief, as dynamic and fluctuating forces.

We will now proceed with a brief introduction to the research setting and methods, before turning to Nusrat's narratives, which we were able to track over two years. The discussion returns to the theorisation of relational negotiation and draws out the wider implications for family sociology.

## RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

We are two researchers of British South Asian family life, who have respectively studied concepts of honour (Metlo 2012), chronic illness and divorce (Qureshi 2016; 2019). This paper draws upon a qualitative study, conducted by Kaveri Qureshi between 2012-14, with primarily working class Pakistani Muslim families in East London and Peterborough. The study sought to examine the moral reasonings undergirding divorce in British South Asian contexts. The study attempted to get beyond methodological individualism by contextualizing instances of marital instability within the wider dynamics of families and communities. Instead of basing the study on one-off interviews, Kaveri sought to emulate other longitudinal studies involving multiple family members (Simpson 1998; Smart and Neale 1999). The study involved interviews with 74 informants, 51 women and 23 men, and with 29 of the informants Kaveri was able to track their predicaments as they evolved over the fieldwork; with 15 participants very enduring research relationships developed, involving informal interactions over a period of years. This research design involved the development of relationships of rapport, trust and mutual intimacy, which no doubt contributed to the richness and intimacy of the interviews, as reflected in Nusrat's narratives which we analyse here. Zubaida Metlo was involved in the project as a transcriber and translator. She transcribed the interviews that were given in Urdu, like that of Nusrat, and offered critical interpretations drawing on her training in psychology, which led to our collaboration in writing this paper. Kaveri Qureshi is identified as White British, married into a Pakistani Muslim family. Despite being a racial/ethnic outsider, she was in other respects connected intimately to the study participants because of the extent to which she cared about and listened attentively to their often very painful stories of marital breakdown. Zubaida Metlo is identified as British Pakistani, and interprets Nusrat's interviews from the standpoint of a racial/ethnic insider steeped in South Asian feminism.



In what follows, we examine Nusrat's interviews as narratives. Simpson (1998) analysed divorce narratives as 'architectonic', by which he meant that the act of narration – telling stories – is an *active part* of the process through which ex-partners disentangle themselves from one another. These are narratives that locate now-absent others in relation to the self, and 'by entering this rich mental life', as he suggests, we can grasp the way that people 'move themselves within emergent networks of relationship after divorce' (p.151). This insight into the relational work accomplished by narrative has been appreciated by other studies of family life. In their study of 21<sup>st</sup> century motherhood, for example, Thomson et al. (2011) see the process of 'storying pregnancy' as a central practice through which families are 'named and brought into being at dynamic moments', showing 'what people claim in terms of relatedness to others' (p.27). From this perspective, the storying of marital breakdown is a particularly interesting form of family practice, as it does the work of severing and re-ordering, not producing relationships. Life history methods are thus valuable in the context of divorce research, provided that analytical attention is given to the active work accomplished by narrative.

## **NUSRAT**

Nusrat's case was in many respects very different from most others in Kaveri's study. She was an unusual informant in that she had migrated to the UK with her children to study a postgraduate degree from a UK university. Her class position in Pakistan, as a degree-educated woman working as a teacher at a college, was more privileged than the other informants who hailed from rural families pre-migration. In other respects, however, Nusrat's life was not so dissimilar from the other men and women with whom Kaveri worked. Very soon after she arrived in the UK, her savings from Pakistan evaporated and she turned to sustain herself and her children through low-paid informal social care work; material support from her brothers, several of whom were long-settled in the UK; and social security benefits, once she acquired her Indefinite Leave to Remain.

Nusrat related her life history to Kaveri during lengthy interviews in the summer of 2012. She then returned in the Autumn of 2013, to update Kaveri out of a stated desire to talk through her situation: after the interview, she said she had felt a release of emotional burden. Our rendition of Nusrat's narratives on the termination of her marriage begins with the marital history she charted in the first interviews, before turning to the evolution of her thoughts about divorce over time.

### ***Sounding out others over the question of separation***

Nusrat's official purpose in migrating to the UK in the mid-2000s, with her three children – then aged 9, 6 and 4 – was the pursuit of a postgraduate degree. Behind this official purpose, she explained, was the implicit motive of separating from her husband, who was also a college teacher. Nusrat's marriage had been unconventional, in that it had come about with little involvement from her family; the man she married had been her tutor. Because of their long secret liaison, Nusrat had refused many other proposals; she was touching 30 by the time she told her mother about her desire to marry him. He was from a lower-ranked caste from hers, and Nusrat's father threatened to kill himself rather than allow Nusrat to marry into such a caste, but Nusrat's mother persuaded him to agree on the grounds of Nusrat's age. Three children followed, but despite their long pre-marital liaison Nusrat felt deceived by her husband. Recalling the wedding night itself, she said *'I remember that my tears started from then until I left and separated from him. My life of crying started from that night'*. The promise of love did not materialise. She spoke of long-standing emotional neglect, and of a dissatisfaction that piqued at a point in the early 2000s when her husband began to more actively abuse her, forcing sexual relations. At this juncture, she sought advice and help from a sister, but her sister disappointed her by intoning that it was a husband's prerogative to demand sexual relations:

*She did not take it seriously. She said to me, 'in Islam it is a right of man whatever he wants he can get from his wife'. She said that and I didn't like it- her saying such things in this way. I absolutely did not like it- I did not agree with her belief.*

She therefore turned next to a brother who was usually sympathetic, and took the uncomfortable, difficult step of confiding in him, too. Her brother also advised her to stay silent and promised to intervene through the tried-and-tested methods of intermediation in the family, as described above.

*When I told to my brother, I had told him the all true story about me, even about my sleeping with my husband. I told him 'I want to live separate, I can't bear it any more'... He fell completely silent and then he made me stop, saying 'no, let's hope, we will see about this matter'. So... what my brother did. He had sent a message to my father-in-law, saying 'please come here, I want to talk to you'... [sighs deeply]. So my father-in-law told my husband that 'her brother told me he wants to see me'. But what did my husband do.... He said to his father 'go back, I will see to the issue, it's our personal issue' (ghar ka mamla hai).*

Nusrat's attempts at family mediation recall the wider depictions of natal kin support. She turned to her family as sounding boards. She sought from her family recognition, legitimation concerning her conviction that the marriage was abusive, that her husband was failing on his part of the marital contract and that she was right in wanting to separate from him. However for Nusrat, as for many other women in the study, her natal family disappointed her (see Qureshi 2016, p.103-112). It is not insignificant that Nusrat's marriage was self-chosen, as women in so-called 'love marriages' very often described how lingering bad feelings over the marriage reasserted themselves in the apathy of their families towards their difficulties (Qureshi 2016, p.119-123, cf. Grover 2011). Rather than supporting Nusrat's interpretation of the situation and endorsing her release from the marriage, her sister intoned the principle that marriage conveying an inalienable entitlement to sexual relations,

which her sister attributed to Islam *tout court*. This is a common lay assumption and belief about Islam, drawing from the Prophetic saying that of all the permitted acts, divorce is most displeasing to God. However, reformist Islamic texts, which now circulate widely in the form of books, magazines, digests, TV, radio and the internet, have sought to re-interpret the authoritative religious sources so as to emphasise simultaneously the legitimate basis of entitlement to divorce, even if a wife is merely not happy, and certainly in cases of abuse (see Qureshi et al. 2014; Qureshi 2018). Turning to her brother for support escalated the seriousness of Nusrat's complaint, as brothers, conventionally, have culturally-elaborated responsibilities of defending their sisters, particularly where their sisters' sexuality is implicated (Metlo 2012). Yet Nusrat's brother also declined to legitimate her expressed desire for release from the marriage and went down the route of involving Nusrat's father-in-law so that he might talk sense into his son. The involvement of elders is a process of intermediation reliant on patriarchal norms, in which older generations are powerful, venerated and respected. However, Nusrat's husband did not permit his father to get involved. This story resonates with other women who described their husbands refusing the command of mediators, and particularly women in 'love marriages' (Qureshi 2016, p.122). Anticipating that her parents would be no more supportive if she turned to them for help, Nusrat next took the bold step of protesting to her husband, herself, that she would leave him, using educational migration to the UK as a means to do so. As she recounted:

*This was my strategy – to leave the country for my higher education. Because I knew that, in my position I cannot stay with my parents. They will pressure me, if they get pressure from the society then they will tell me 'go and stay with your husband'. I was not supposed to live alone because of the condition of the country, it is not favorable for a woman to live alone.*

She recalled her uncertainty over the prospect of departing for the UK, and taking solace from the encouragement of her children, whom she consulted. They too were sounding boards for her in her decision to separate, and they gave their assent. At the final point of departure Nusrat recalled

poignantly that her mother had, finally, spoken words of support, encouraging her – in spite of Nusrat’s expectation that her natal family would not encourage her to separate – to start afresh.

*The children were very wise. I think they knew all about what was happening in the house. Then I asked from them twice, once I made them sit down, the elder two... I said to them ‘if you want to stay here then we’ll stay here’ (ap rahna chaho to bhale ither raho) [pause]... then when we got a visa, I think it was at the end of September, we got it... In the end, my mother supported me. When she said goodbye to me at the airport, till now I can’t forget her hand [sobbing deeply], how she waved me off saying ‘goodbye’ to me. She said to me ‘just go, start again, from scratch’ (us ne mujhe kaha ‘apni life phir se start karo, jao’). ‘Do what you want’ (jaise bhi tumhen acha lage) [long pause].*

Nusrat did not speculate about why her mother might have uttered these surprising words, going in face of the disapproval she had anticipated. Nusrat did however return to this sign of her mother’s approval and permission at a later point in narrating her intent to divorce, as we describe below.

### ***Dependence on natal family deterring divorce***

By the summer of 2012, Nusrat had been separated from her husband for the decade she had been in the UK and was drawn to the idea of divorce. As with her earlier separation by the means of study migration, when she explained why she was contemplating divorce, she immediately spoke of others’ opinions on the matter. Before giving the interview, she had asked her daughter’s opinion:

*Just this morning, my daughter was saying to me ‘mum, please share one thing with Kaveri, that now the time has come for divorce’.... So I tested her, saying that ‘I don’t want to share such thing to others because you are my children, maybe in the future you will blame me, say “our mother has snatched our father away from us”’. Then, you know what, she replied, laughing, ‘mum, that moment came and it’s gone, we have no more feelings about it’. I don’t know what feeling was that*

*and how it has gone from their life. But she said to me ‘mum, after divorce you will feel that your life is your own. You will feel that is yours’. She said ‘now, this is your time, you have to think about this now’.*

Here, Nusrat presented her growing resolve to divorce as her own and her children’s will. But other important people in her life had contradictory positions on the matter – her brothers and her parents, who were now living in the UK too. She lived in the house of one of her brothers, and on the same street as her parents and other siblings. Being materially dependent on them discouraged her:

*Now I am living among them (in ke beech mein baithi hoon). If tomorrow I can rent an independent room, a one or two bedroom house, then perhaps. Then maybe I can proceed easily and independently. But now I am living among them then I have to see how they will react, which they will, definitely- this is a huge botheration for me. To face them, then for that I need energy, strategy and time.*

She had first discussed her intention to divorce with a brother whom she believed to be more ‘liberal’ than the brother she was currently living with. However, he had warned her off the idea in no uncertain terms: *‘[he said] “baji” (elder sister), “leave it, why are you thinking about this, if you take a divorce or not what difference does it make”’*. She then recounted a particularly emotionally charged rebuttal from her mother, when she attempted to intimate her intention to divorce:

*Ammi said to me ‘Sharom karo, abhi tum bhoorhi ho rahi ho, kya zaroorat hai tumhen yeh cheez lene ki’ (shame on you, you are getting old, what is the reason to get this) and continued saying ‘what difference will it make if you get this divorce? It means your intentions are bad, kisi dusre mard ke piche paro gi?’ (Are you launching yourself after another man?) She continued to repeat herself in*

*this unpleasant and humiliating tone. She has this obsession that I might wish to go for another husband or that I will go for to make a relationship with another man.*

Nusrat overtly disagreed with her mother's moral standards, but the reprimanding tone her mother had used had struck a chord. She felt bound to these moral standards, as she said:

*For that [divorce] I need energy which I do not have at the moment, and I will not have until I am grounded financially. I don't have any financial stability. Now I am among them, they look after me, they support me, so-called. If I were living at a distance then maybe I could do whatever I want. I think only my nature and my own efforts and my own strength will allow me to stand high on my own feet. Only my own decision and my inner courage also stop now living with them and eating their food. Such things make you weak.*

In this interview in 2012, Nusrat suggested that she wanted to seek a divorce, but she could not act on this internal resolve because of her dependence on her natal family. This was partly a material dependence – her lack of financial stability made her refrain from offending their sensibilities. But it was also partly an emotional dependence on them for approval and esteem. She presented very clearly the psychic hold that her family's views had over her. In particular, she could not blot out her mother's disapproving views, as we now discuss in relation to Nusrat's later interview.

### ***What she wants and what others want***

By the Autumn of 2013, more than a year had passed since the first interviews. Over the intervening months, it seemed that Nusrat had looped in and out of the question of divorce numerous times. Her thinking had clearly been influenced by some time spent in Pakistan. That year, for the first time in a decade, she had returned to Pakistan and felt, very keenly, the need to 'get rid of' her husband's name, as she put it, at last. Being re-immersed in that society had shocked her, she said.

*People were introducing me as '[Husband's name] ki biwi hai' (the wife-of her husband). I didn't like that. Because the habit has gone from me, I've been here for ten years, I'd forgotten that this is how people see me. So, to one person I said 'it'd be better if you said "she's Nusrat"'*.

As before, she tested out others' opinions on the matter, sounding out a sister and a friend, whom she described as a feminist. Whilst her sister advocated tried-and-tested methods of intermediation, the feminist friend advised her to go straight to court and request a *khula* (a woman-initiated divorce), telling Nusrat it was not the big a deal she had made it out to be in her head. Indeed, Women Under Muslim Laws have criticized the greater facility that a woman has in acquiring a *khula* in Pakistan than in one of the UK's informal sharia councils (Warraich and Balchin 2006); Pakistani judges have made it increasingly easy for women to obtain a *khula*, dispensing with the requirement of the consent of the husband for a wife's right to unilaterally dissolve a marriage (Abbasi 2016). Contemplating this advice, Nusrat returned to the UK oscillating between moments of firm resolve to divorce, and moments of uncertainty, which had piqued the moment she spoke of her intention to her mother.

*She just sat there, for such a long time, just looking at me, and looking at me with bahut dukh aur takleef (deep sadness and suffering). And she became so quiet, silent, that... I felt that very deeply she didn't want this.*

After speaking to her mother, her resolve had quelled. Some time later, she was granted a free consultation with a psychologist to whom she'd been referred by a mental health NGO, which had made her again drawn to the idea of divorce. But two days before the re-interview Nusrat again had a sudden change of heart. This was, she said, because of thinking once more about her mother.



*Since the day before yesterday I've had this thing in my mind... that I should forget this thing. Why should I take a divorce? Why? I don't know... am I giving up... am I a failure... I'm hesitating. Now I'm thinking, 'I won't take it'. Why should I? It doesn't make any difference. Everyone thinks divorce means, if a woman takes it, that she wants to remarry, that there is a man in her life and that she's in a relationship. Because this is immediately what people judge. And since in my life there's no such man, and I have no such purpose, then I shouldn't take it. Aisa ho raha hai, mera jaise na, aaj ek hoon kal dusri ho jati hoon, mera zahn is tarah karta (this is what my mind is doing, one day I am one thing and the next day I am something else, my mind changes).*

She was ambivalent, divided, as the quote suggests. Explaining what had changed in her thinking those two days previously, she returned immediately to her mother's disapproval. She went back to the conversation she'd had with her mother, seeking permission from her, from the memory of her earlier approval of her decision to start afresh, and wishing her mother could say the same now:

*I reminded my mother... reminded her of the day when she said to me, in Pakistan, that 'leave this place, get away from here'. My mother has gone through so many important emotional stages in my life... She has led a difficult life herself, in her marriage, but in spite of that she can't understand me, and I can't make anybody else understand me... what do I want?*

This question, 'what do I want', was a preoccupation, a theme she returned to, in various ways, throughout the re-interview. She talked again about her uncomfortable dependence on her brothers, on whom she said she was *mohtaj* (dependent, but in the negative sense of being a burden). It was not that she could not deal with her brother's disapproval of the divorce, she clarified. The *real* problem was that, in having to take help from them, having to live so closely among them, her children would inevitably be exposed to their disapproval and might come – perhaps – to doubt her as a mother:

*They will definitely say ‘what’s happened to your mother, is she not in her sense, why is she taking such decisions’ and even if they just say that, that’s not right. And I don’t want there to become a khalish (gap) between me and my children... that’s the thing I’m frightened of.*

Kaveri tried to clarify what she meant by there becoming a gap between she and her children:

*I don’t know, what khalish (gap) is in the mind of the children’s hearts, what they aren’t telling me... sometimes this thing worries me, that would the children one day think of me, ‘what did our mother do... she left our father’. This is the thing that worries me. My mother gave me this fear, it’s not mine, she put this fear into me and it bothers me, it worries me. (Yeh mujhe meri maa ne fear dala hai, mera nahi hai, us ne dala hai mujhe). Since yesterday, this is what’s bothering me.*

In this very significant and revealing extract, Nusrat explains that, in trying to sort out ‘what do I want’, she was trying to separate out her mother’s thoughts, her mother’s views and interpretations from her own – ‘my mother gave me this fear, it’s not mine’. So far she had been unable to split her mother’s opinions from her own. Her internal resolve and will was not entirely her own but tied to others’ views and thus unstable, not as solid as she first indicated. And it was not just her mother’s views that she was trying, but unable to detach from her own – although her mother had a strong psychic hold: it was also her husband’s. After Kaveri turned off the tape recorder, Nusrat chatted for some time about other matters. She picked up her things and made to leave, and then frowned, reflecting on the conversation. She still hadn’t been able to explain the nub of it, she said:

*I wasn’t able to convey to you with the strength of feeling that I was having, last night, when I was thinking all night, and the depth of my feelings this morning.*

*Yes, it must have been very strong, because your intentions changed so completely in just a few days.*

*Actually, it's my nature that's caring, that made me change my intentions. I am a very caring person and I didn't want to hurt my mother or hurt him.... Most of all, I suddenly had the thought that:- what if he stops thinking about me as the mother of his children? Being a mother has such hassiyat (significance) for me. I have got used to the idea that he no longer thinks of me as his wife. That no longer troubles me and I wouldn't think twice about divorce from that perspective. But the thought that he might cut me out as the mother of his children, too.... that was too much for me to bear.*

Her husband's views thus also mattered to her, even if he was now only an absent presence in her life. Even prior to taking the step of divorce, the 'architectonic' (Simpson 1998) process entailed involved remapping multiple aspects of Nusrat's simultaneous kinship identities – at the same time daughter, sister, wife, and mother-of her husband's children. Whilst she could assent to no longer being her husband's wife, the idea of him no longer thinking of her as the mother-of his children was unacceptable. Her intent and sense of self were bound up in others' remembered views and words.

## **CONCLUDING DISCUSSION**

In this paper, we suggest that Nusrat's narratives are illustrative of the 'architectonic' re-ordering of kinship through divorce (Simpson 1998). Whereas sociologists have focussed on the re-ordering of relationships *post*-divorce, Nusrat's narratives chart the deep involvement and implicatedness of multiple family members *prior* to divorce, in the initial decision to divorce. This decision emerges as a relational negotiation at multiple layers, both interpersonal and intersubjective.

At the interpersonal layer, Nusrat relates the extensive involvement of others in the decision to divorce, from their initial roles as sounding boards and advisors, to more ritualized interventions in the form of appointed intermediation with her ex-husband and/or his senior family members.

Nusrat involved her siblings, her children, her mother and her friends. This is a first way in which the decision to divorce is relational in the sense conveyed by Smart (2007) – sustaining and maintaining these networks is active work. The decision to divorce is also relational in the second sense conveyed by Smart (2007) – to let relationships with others enter into one's reasoning over a decision is a state of mind. When Nusrat talks about how she ought not upset her brothers by going against their wishes and divorcing, particularly in the context of her dependence on them as a single mother, it is this relationality that is at stake – as a state of mind – which emerges, in her predicament as a single mother on low income, as a knit of material and moral interdependencies.

At the intersubjective layer, we encounter increasing complexity between the two sets of interviews. Over the intervening year, her preoccupation with divorce had grown, her changes of mind had become more incessant, as she said '*aaj ek hoon kal dusri ho jati hoon*' (one day I am one thing and the next day I am something else). She was drawn to divorce, but then doubted her own reasoning. She even questioned the stability of what she had represented as her own internal will. She talked herself through, and re-lived the feelings of resolve that had passed through her in other conversations, with her friends, her daughter, and the psychologist, as well as the feelings of weakness which were piqued in conversations with her mother. The possibilities that arise through the remembered words of others chart only a momentary solidity before she shifts her perspective on herself, as viewed through others. Intriguingly, the final quotes suggest that she was on some level cognisant of this multiplicity in her subjectivity and of how her own sense of what she wanted was tied to others. She tried to separate her mother's opinions but was unable to split them off from her own; not could she blot out her husband's views of her as mother-of his children.

There are deep insights here with the Meadian perspectives on which Roseneil and Ketokivi (2016) draw upon as one way of elaborating their argument about the relational emergence of the self. Holland et al. (2001) take from Mead's 'sociogenic' conception of personhood the insight that 'the

person acquires the ability to take the standpoint of others as she learns to objectify herself by the qualities of her performance in and commitment to various social positions' (p.4). They draw out parallels between Mead and critical theorist Bakhtin's (1981) work on 'authoring the self' (Holland et al. 2001, p.172-3). In Bakhtin's view, self-process is dialogical, as Holland et al. put it 'the self authors itself, and is thus made knowable, in the words of others' (p.173). Hence their focus on 'inner speech' and self-authoring as the 'orchestration' of the voices of others (p.178). Often, as we see with Nusrat, the inner voices are in conflict, and have to be put together in some way. In Nusrat's narratives, we see how criticism or approval of the decision to divorce takes on the voices of her significant others, her mother, her siblings, her children, her former husband, also her friends.

These ideas concerning the fundamentally dialogical nature of self-process – that relationships are not only around a person, connecting them to their significant others but also internal, projected into their selfhood – are valuable in drawing out the multiple layers of relationality in Nusrat's negotiation of divorce. Further, they suggest a means of theorizing negotiation as a reflexive form of agency. Holland et al. use these insights concerning self-authoring to understand how a subject settles upon a course of action through a process of imaginatively objectifying themselves. In the case of Nusrat, we see how her insistent question of 'what do I want' is also about 'who am I'. She asks, 'am I giving up... am I a failure': a failure at the ideal of the persevering wife. Her inner interlocutors' words intersect with changing and heterogeneous cultural and religious texts concerning the obligations and entitlements of a wife. Thus, as Holland et al. conclude, 'the space of authoring, of self-fashioning, remains a social and cultural space... and it remains, more often than not, a contested space, a space of struggle' (p.282). Reflexive agency is linked, very deeply, to webs of culture and belief, which we show to be dynamic and fluctuating forces. Perhaps, because of the cultural context in which she lives – where disapproval of divorce remains socially dominant, despite the haltering social change we have documented (Qureshi 2016; 2018) – Nusrat's narratives show the interpersonal and the intersubjective dimensions of relationality with particular clarity. But if, in

charting out the re-mapping of kinship through divorce, studies of Euro-American families have failed to attend to the relational negotiation of the decision to divorce it is not necessarily because Euro-Americans go about their intimate and family lives in a fundamentally different way from South Asians. It may be because the privileging of the couple relationship in Euro-American societies leaves scholars uninterested in the ways in which uncoupling may involve not just the choices and feelings of the husband and wife – and consideration of the impacts of divorce not just on children, but also on a wider web of relationships. In this regard, sociological theories of individualization are challenged not only by the ongoing importance of values of commitment between kin, but also by evidence that ‘even the most individualized are fated to be inhabited by the traces of the lives of others’ (Roseneil 2009, p.427).

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