



AMMARA MAQSOOD
University College London

Love as understanding:

Marriage, aspiration, and the joint family in middle-class Pakistan

ABSTRACT

In middle-class Pakistan, marriage is the prescribed future for all women, but premarital contact between the sexes is discouraged. To find the right partner, then, without visibly flouting social norms, requires a skillful balancing act between private interests and aspirations, and between public representations and collective concerns. Young women often navigate these conflicting demands by developing what they call an *understanding*: a secret premarital relationship that they normalize by involving family at a late stage to orchestrate an arranged marriage. Firmly enmeshed within the social life of joint families, *understandings* are an instance neither of defying patriarchal norms nor of pursuing self-cultivation within them. Instead, they offer a window into how young women live and explore new possibilities within the vestiges of normative structures. [love, marriage, desire, morality, consumption, joint family, Lahore, Pakistan]

پاکستان کے متوسط طبقہ میں شادی ہر عورت کے مستقبل کا جز ہے اور اس سے پہلے جنسی روابط کی حوصلہ شکنی کی جاتی ہے۔ ان حالات میں اپنا صحیح ساتھی تلاش کرنے کے لئے ہنرمندی سے توازن قائم کرنا ضروری ہے۔ جس میں نجی دلچسپی اور خواہشات کے ساتھ عوامی نکتہ نظر اور اجتماعی سوچ کو مدنظر رکھنا ضروری ہے۔ ان متضاد تقاضاؤں کا حل ہے "انڈراسٹینڈنگ": ایک خفیہ سمجھوتا اور ملاقات کا سلسلہ جو بعد میں خاندانی رضامندی کے ساتھ شادی کا ذریعہ بن جاتی ہے۔ مشترکہ خاندان کی سماجی زندگی کے گہرے ہوئے ماحول میں یہ دلچسپیاں نہ تو بزرگوں کے اصول کی خلاف ورزی کرتی ہیں اور نہ ان کی نشوونما۔ اس کے برعکس موجودہ اصولی ساخت میں یہ ایک نئے طریقہ کار کا راستہ تلاش کر لیتی ہیں۔ [محبت، شادی، خواہش/تمنا، اخلاقیات، کہپت، مشترکہ خاندان، لاہور، پاکستان]

Yes, you could say that I already had a spy in that household. It made it easy for me to make my decision," Samra said, jokingly, as she recounted how she had met and married Sherafghan.¹ A few years earlier, her elder sister had married his brother, and the wedding events and continued relations between the families had provided Samra and Sherafghan with ample opportunities to meet and get to know each other. She had liked Sherafghan from the moment she saw him, but in accepting his advances and allowing the courtship to develop, she had also been mindful of other matters. Through visits to her sister's married home, she had learned that her in-laws were *open-minded people*, allowing the daughters-in-law of the house considerable freedom and movement. "One has to be careful when making an *understanding* with a boy," Samra confided. "I knew I never wanted a life where I was not allowed to go anywhere and everyone watched my every move." At the same time, her sister had been able to reassure Samra of Sherafghan's sincerity. "My sister would tell me things like 'Don't worry, he is not playing with you. I have not seen him on the phone with other girls ... he is hardworking, goes to work on time. He will keep you well.'" Their courtship developed over a year, almost entirely in secret, and it eventually culminated in his family's sending a formal marriage proposal to her family, the typical way to initiate marriage proceedings in urban Pakistan.

In an environment where marriage is the prescribed future for all women, but premarital contact between the sexes is discouraged, finding the right partner, without visibly flouting social norms, requires a skillful balancing act between private interests and aspirations, and between public representations and collective concerns. How young women navigate such concerns is both constrained and informed by wider pressures and practices among Lahore's upwardly mobile and "new-middle-class" groups (Maqsood 2017; see also Maqsood 2014). More specifically, economic precarity and desires for consumption are both growing and have combined, in

a pattern noticed globally (Donner and Santos 2016). This combination has strengthened the norms of joint family living in Pakistan's aspiring middle class. The pooling of resources, through joint living, reduces risk and everyday costs, facilitating greater spending on the luxuries and pleasures associated with middle-class status. The practicalities of joint family life sit uneasily, however, with young women's romantic desires, which evoke a future centered around the pleasures of nuclear life. Yet joint family living also opens up space for pursuing individual romantic interests. Young women like Samra use their kin and family connections to find the right match, and they draw on their emotional connections with elders to orchestrate a socially sanctioned marriage, or, as it is termed in academic discourse, a "love-cum-arranged" alliance (Donner 2002; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008).

The play between individual desires and collective concerns in the lives of my interlocutors relates directly to current debates on love in postcolonial contexts. In these debates marital and intimate practices have been used as sites to question older anthropological assumptions (Thomas and Cole 2009; Venkatesan et al. 2011). With regard to South Asia, recent scholarship has disrupted the common division, in academic and popular discourse, between arranged marriages, as reflecting traditional and collective pressures, and love marriages, as reflecting individualized choice and agency. On the one hand, ethnographies of love marriages have problematized the assumption of agency as individual autonomy (Abeyasekera 2016; De Neve 2016; Mody 2008). On the other hand, ethnographic and historical work has challenged the depiction of arranged alliances as "traditional" (Majumdar 2009) and described the space that the institution gives to personal dispositions and emotions (Shaw and Charsley 2006), as well as to notions of companionship and affection (Donner 2008, 2016; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Osella 2012). Taken together, these works critique, both implicitly and explicitly (De Neve 2016; Donner 2016; Donner and Santos 2016; Osella 2012), the mapping of arranged and love marriages on opposite ends of a "world-historical telos" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 267). Here, "modernity" represents a shift from collective and traditional obligations toward the individual autonomy of "pure relationships" (Giddens 1992). The ethnography that follows builds on this critique, drawing out the limitations of such dichotomies in understanding the presence of joint family arrangements. Presented as a symbol of "traditional" values, joint family living has been strengthened and revitalized by, and facilitates the consumption of, "modernity" in middle-class settings.

My main aim, however, is not to evaluate the "modernity" of joint families but to draw out the space and opportunities they provide for romantic pursuits. The ethnography here bears more squarely on love itself, centering on the experience and what it enables. The local notion

of *understandings*, used to talk about premarital relationships, offers a window on the way love introduces "new conditions of possibility" (Faier 2007, 150). That is to say, it opens up new potentials and avenues, in which women can self-make and build toward a future of financial security and emotional fulfillment in an environment of limited options and considerable patriarchal control. Following Lieba Faier (2007), I take love to be a "cultural discourse and a self-making term" (150) through which my interlocutors lay claim to "modern and cosmopolitan personhood" (149).

At first glance, love-cum-marriages appear to be a curious place to begin a discussion of new possibilities. Usually, and especially in the literature on South Asia as well as the Muslim world, scholars focus on love marriages and elopements that openly flout (patriarchal) norms and the limits of community lifeworlds (Das 1995). They are viewed as opening new, if ambivalent (Mody 2008), potentialities. Meanwhile, love-cum-arranged marriages, with their insistence on family acceptance and, in this case, use of kin connections, suggest an upholding of restrictive structural norms. Yet it is precisely through exploring such actions that we can glimpse a form of desire and agency, one that neither opposes patriarchal norms nor fits or pursues self-cultivation within them. It instead points us toward a new way of thinking about self-making, in which women use the very kin connections and family arrangements that otherwise inhibit them from imagining and building toward a new future.

Love, desire, and agency

In liberal theorizations and in "Western" assumptions about the person, desire, much like agency, is often viewed as valorizing the individual. In this respect, agency works against or, at the very least, despite structural or normative constraints. Although this perspective has been problematized, especially in feminist theory, what needs to be underscored here is that desire represents a certain degree of individual autonomy. In contrast, recent ethnographic writing centered on nonliberal, predominantly Muslim contexts has emphasized that desire is relational, situated in and articulated through normative social forms. For instance, Suad Joseph (1993, 2005) has argued that desire—understood as either an erotic or nonerotic yearning, longing, or wish—is learned, taught, and practiced through relational pedagogies and is constantly relearned and retaught with age and changing status and relationships. Rather than stand for an individual autonomy situated outside normative structures, desire is "assimilated into and claimed by the matrix of relationships in which it is constituted" (Joseph 2005, 81). Perhaps the most influential rejoinder, in this regard, has come from Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005), whose exploration of the Egyptian mosque movement emphasizes a form of individual agency that does not reflect a desire for freedom

or resistance from structural norms but that pursues self-cultivation within their bounds.

Although, as Mahmood (2001, 2005) also notes, such aspirations to self-cultivation are read as false consciousness in much of feminist theory, there is some agreement that desire is often situated and imagined within and articulated through normative forms (Chodorow 1978; Zelizer 2005), especially when it relates to romantic love. As Lauren Berlant (2012, 45) reminds us, the term *desire* was popularized in the modern vocabulary through radical movements of the 1960s, and it was used to oppose normative institutions (family, religion, capitalism) that regulate intimate behavior. But romantic love legislates the destructive potential of desire, offering a set of conventional narratives and images “that install the institutions of intimacy (most explicitly the married couple and the intergenerational family) as the proper sites for providing a subject with a life and future” (Berlant 2012, 86). Although represented and experienced as an authentic expression of the self, in opposition to the collective, romantic love is, in fact, heavily mediated by the popular imagery and demands of capitalism (Zelizer 2005).

When conceived of as *understandings*, romantic love introduces “new conditions of possibilities” (Faier 2007, 150) for young middle-class women, a site to enact desires and imagine new futures. The desires, fantasies, and aspirations that flourish in this site, although heavily influenced by the market economy, are frowned on in the social world of joint families and kinship ties. But rather than opposing normative structures, *understandings* are developed and deepened through them. In pursuing romantic *understandings*, women uphold gendered norms of comportment and cultivate themselves in styles of idealized conduct; doing so allows them to access hidden spaces and to find fleeting moments of support within the “practical logic” (Bourdieu 1977, 1990) of kinship ties. Moreover, pursuing love and romance requires the complicity of other women, and it is often hidden from men; this arises not so much from feminist solidarity but from a complex negotiation of intimate pasts, kin relations, and other identifications. *Understandings* encapsulate forms of action and self-making that neither clash with dominant rules and obligations nor culminate the desires and aspirations that they engender. Instead, they shed light on the opportunities that lurk within the vestiges of normative structures, in which women can explore and live out the possibilities that romantic love offers.

Locating love marriages, upward mobility, and joint families

In middle-class Lahore, as reported in other contexts (Donner 2002; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Osella 2012; Osella and Osella 2000), arranged marriages—with increasing space for chaperoned premarital contact or conversations over the phone—remain the norm in both preference and

prevalence. As in other parts of South Asia, love marriages in middle-class Lahore are viewed as unsettling kinship and social norms and are, thus, a site of considerable tension. Couples, and especially women, who have eloped or married without the permission of male elders are susceptible to violence and coercion, often under the trope of “honor.”² The possibility of violence surrounding love marriages is an instance of how kin groups and communities police gendered bodies and boundaries (Das 1995; Mody 2008). My fieldwork, however, revealed that love marriages *within* families were often more contentious than those outside them, suggesting that crossing community boundaries is not the only reason such unions are socially problematic. We also need to take into account questions of patriarchal control, interpersonal relations, and relationships within families, themes that recur across this ethnography.

Anecdotal evidence and my fieldwork suggest that love marriages—in the shape of elopement and, especially, love-cum-arranged marriages—are on the increase. But this has not changed the overall negative perception of love unions, even among women who have successful love-cum-arranged marriages. For the older generation, premarital romances and love marriages are a way of talking about broader social transformations and, in particular, changes brought on by modernity (Collier 1997; Marsden 2007; Menin 2015). Technological advances, such as mobile phones and social media, are cited as reasons why premarital romances are on the rise, and many lament that young people are very headstrong and independent. These remarks are often ambivalent, signaling both a resignation about decreasing parental authority and, simultaneously, an acknowledgment that modernity has arrived, an ever-present aspiration in postcolonial contexts. Discussions of love are often a site for maintaining and expressing generational differences (Abeyasekera 2016; Donner 2016; Marsden 2007; Thomas and Cole 2009, 14). Yet young women—including those who had love marriages themselves—were equally dismissive of love marriages, because they questioned the durability of the match. Paralleling ideas about “adjustment” (Uberoi and Tyagi 1994), most believed that such unions are unlikely to succeed because people—of course, women—start having too many *expectations*. Meanwhile, women who had engaged in premarital romances themselves would argue that their case was exceptional and unique, that theirs was not a *typical love affair* but an *understanding* that they had built with their partner.

The anxiety about longevity points toward the centrality of the institution; within this demographic, as in Pakistan more generally, marriage represents a transition to social adulthood and respect. In addition, although these women were all educated, often having master’s degrees, they belonged to a demographic in which women are not expected to work outside the home and, often, are uninterested in doing so. Marriage, in these circumstances, provided them

with both a social and an economic future. Given these high stakes, marriage prospects were carefully cultivated and reputations carefully guarded. These concerns affected both the shape of my fieldwork and my relations with my interlocutors. Married women were more forthcoming about premarital relationships and intimate desires than unmarried women, particularly those who were in the midst of a romance and thus worried about the consequences of disclosure. Married women, too, were often concerned about their reputation, particularly among their in-laws, and they worried about information spilling out to the wrong parties.

Ultimately, it was my own position, of an inside-outsider, that gave me access to the lives of my interlocutors. As a woman who grew up in Pakistan, was not part of their social circles, and was now based abroad, I was familiar enough to be viewed as understanding their actions yet distant enough to be told things that they did not want others to find out. I was careful to maintain this distance; although anthropologists are often expected to enter or find themselves amid their interlocutors' familial and social networks, I found that mine were more open and sharing when I remained outside these connections. On occasions when I overstepped these boundaries, I often faced censure and withdrawal of trust. For instance, an interlocutor once invited me to accompany her to a tea gathering in her neighborhood, where I was (unknowingly) introduced to and had a conversation with the sister-in-law of another interlocutor, Saba. Later that evening, Saba called me, in tears, and scolded me for speaking to her in-laws. She repeatedly asked me if I had shared anything she had told me and described the disastrous consequence that awaited her if I had.

Her reaction may sound excessive, but it reflects some of the anxieties related to joint family life, a living arrangement common to most of my interlocutors and, more broadly, to Pakistan's upwardly mobile and new middle-class groups. Within these groups (Maqsood 2014), as with aspiring groups in other postcolonial contexts (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012; Liechty 2003; Srivastava 2007), upward mobility is closely associated with the experience, consumption, and status of modernity. Locally, this translates into sending children to private English-medium schools, consuming (locally) branded goods, and undertaking Westernized leisure activities. But typical middle-class professions, such as administrative posts or professional positions (doctors, lawyers, engineers) in state institutions, do not come with the income and privileges that can support such a lifestyle. Likewise, promises have gone unfulfilled by the growth of the private sector and the influx of multinationals, both part of Pakistan's economic liberalization since the early 1990s.

Many young men had pursued degrees in business administration with aspirations for well-paid jobs in multinational corporations and banks, or in well-known local com-

panies. After graduating, however, they were either unable to land these coveted jobs or were hired to positions that did not pay well or included few prospects for promotion (cf. Jeffrey 2010; Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2004, 2005). The harsh labor market, with little room for vertical movement, along with the valorized status of owning a business—being your own boss—has meant that most are involved in small to midsize businesses, selling mobile phones, computers, generators, auto parts, and so on. Those who remain state employees or who work in other professions augment their income by investing in urban property.

In an uncertain economic environment, property investment and business ventures are immensely risky, heavy losses being as much a possibility as quick profits. Any setback, caused by a main earner's sudden death or illness, or by political and economic instability, can quickly push an aspiring middle-class family down the socioeconomic ladder with little room for recovery (Maqsood 2017, 7). In addition, the initial investment in such ventures is high. With little available state support, most rely on collective family investment to offset the costs and distribute risk. In most cases, business owners do not draw a salary for themselves; instead, the combined household costs are met by the business. It is through living together and family support that entrepreneurs achieve success (cf. De Neve 2016) and can enjoy the pleasures of their success. Combining basic living costs frees up money for consuming and enjoying goods and activities that match their aspirations to middle-class status.

My intention here is not to reduce joint family living to mere economic practicalities but to draw out its continuing centrality for contemporary middle-class life in Pakistan. Its persistence is not simply about deference to "tradition"—although it is certainly talked about in this manner and presented as a marker of middle-class morality. As with Rochona Majumdar's (2009) historical analysis of arranged marriages as emerging through an engagement with colonial modernity, contemporary joint-living arrangements have been invigorated by an involvement with the "modern." The new middle class has involved itself in the enterprise and business culture, and the associated desires of consumption and display that valorize the individual (De Neve 2016), and this has led the class to rely on the joint family for support.³ If, according to Zygmunt Bauman (2003), the dissolution of all "traditional bonds," like those of kinship, leads to "liquid modernity," the new middle class in Pakistan can consume this modernity only through its family ties.

In joint family arrangements, it is common to find a set of brothers residing with their families in the same house as their parents and unmarried sisters. Depending on their economic position, this can range from each brother possessing one room in a single-floor house to building a portion above the main house, which includes bedrooms and a

separate kitchen. For instance, Samra, mentioned in the beginning, lived in a home in which each nuclear family had a separate floor; the parents had helped each son, at the time of marriage, build a bedroom, kitchen, and living space. In contrast, Yasmeen, who appears later in this article, lived in a single-story house where she had a private bedroom but shared living and eating spaces with her parents-in-law and the families of her brothers-in-law. She hoped that one day they could afford to build a second story. For most women, the joint family is both a restriction, involving increased surveillance and housework for everyone, but also a source of support, in that they have the help and company of other women in the house. Young women—married and unmarried—rarely leave the house unchaperoned, and the presence of older sisters-in-law means that they can be accompanied by them rather than always wait for the men to get home. As we shall see, it is through skill in navigating surveillance and in developing bonds of solidarity that young women can pursue their romantic interests.

Love as understanding

The idea of *understanding* mediates many of the tensions and contradictions surrounding the pursuit and changing expectations of love in middle-class settings. In recounting their romances leading to marriage, women often differentiated between *aṣl mo ḥabbat* (“pure” or “real” love)—usually spoken of as a thing of the past—and the shallow and frivolous intentions that motivate contemporary alliances.⁴ Such comparisons reflected both anxieties about the effects of “globalized modernity on intimate and social life” (Menin 2015, 896) and concerns about reputation and self-representation (see, e.g., Carey 2012). For instance, like the older generation, many young women express worries about the effects of mobile phones, even as they depend on them for cultivating romances. In the past, they would often comment, couples fell in love and committed to each other for life, without ever exchanging more than a few words. In contrast, men these days spoke to women for years on the phone, without ever committing, and it was difficult to determine what was *aṣl* (real) and what was *timepass* (see, e.g., Jeffrey 2010). Through such criticisms, they represented their own talking on the phone as different from that of those who were simply interested in *timepass*, presenting themselves as morally upright (cf. Carey 2012).⁵

Similar kinds of moral distinctions and nostalgic valorizations have been noted in ethnographic work on love in other contexts (Marsden 2007; Schielke 2015; Willerslev 2011). In examples from South Asia and the Muslim world, “real” or pure love is closely associated with the emotions and concepts articulated in classic literary forms, such as Sufi poetry, *dāstān*, and *gazzal* (Abu-Lughod 1987; Marsden 2007; Olszewska 2015; Orsini 2002).⁶ These forms, representative of “authentic” culture, are viewed as containing and

articulating emotions of matching purity and depth. Central to these forms is the figure of the Beloved, which can ambiguously represent both adoration of Allah and worldly desires and passions; interpretation depends on the mood and intentions of the reader or listener. My interlocutors occasionally drew on these sources, quoting or referring to a couplet to elaborate their feelings or explain the meaning of love.

Yet the conception of love in these forms sits uncomfortably with the aspirations and expectations that my interlocutors associate with the experience. In classic literary forms, love, whether in the context of worldly attachment or adoration of the otherworldly Creator, constitutes a loss and annihilation of the self. It thus stands in opposition to the domestic domain and the set of familial obligations, identities, and relations that constitute the person within it.⁷ For aspiring middle-class women, not only does love ideally culminate in marriage, but it is also linked to imagining and making a future self. Samuli Schielke (2015, 178) notes a parallel shift in Egypt, where the ideal of true love as sacrifice is increasingly being viewed as sacrifice “for the sake of something, not just for its own sake.” The idea of *understanding* and the language surrounding it attempt to resolve these differences in idealized notions of love and the new expectations attached to it.

Rather than relying on Urdu or Punjabi, languages that they were otherwise more comfortable speaking, most young women used English words to describe their premarital relationships. The terms *dating* and *going out*, commonly used in the English-speaking world, were used only pejoratively. The preferred term was *understanding*—for instance, *hamārī understanding ho g’āī* (our understanding happened)—which indicated sincerity and seriousness of intention. In contrast, *dating* denoted frivolity and a degree of immorality, a term reserved for those who were simply interested in having fun, without commitment. The English word *love* was used in text messages and in the poems, song lyrics, and quotes that were sent via mobile phones or written on cards, but it was rarely uttered verbally to describe relationships and emotions. There was a similar avoidance of using Urdu words that form the closest parallel to love, such as *piyār* or *mo ḥabbat*, even though they were used to describe other relationships, such as those with parents, siblings, and female friends. As with *dating*, these words in the context of romance connoted immorality (cf. Abeyasekera 2016, 7; Mody 2008, 41). Instead, the English word *like* was used, for example “Phir un ne kahā, meñ āp ko bahut like kartā hon” (Then he said I like you very much). Partners were referred to as *friends* and, occasionally, *dost*—the Urdu word for “friend.”

The use of English words to describe romantic relations reflects, I argue, two simultaneous processes: on the one hand, a domestication of love and the removal of its dangerous elements; on the other hand, a coming to terms with

and working through new emotions and relationships. In contrast to a love that leads to a loss of self and disregard for existing social ties, the term *understanding* implies reciprocity and reciprocal qualities, placing it within the realm of responsibility and obligation. This is visible also in the words, again in English, that women used to describe the qualities that had attracted them to their partners, the most used of which were *caring*, *simple* (meaning, in this context, the opposite of “conniving”), *straightforward*, *good-looking*, *quiet*, and *shy*. Like *understanding*, these words either suggest a set of reciprocities or reflect matching behavior between the couple—only a *simple* girl would see the value of a *simple* man—and tether love to the domestic world of responsibility.

But if, to draw on Berlant’s (2011) analysis, desire is being disciplined by marriage here, it is also opening up space to renegotiate relations in marriage. As others have noted regarding the use of English in India (Ashar et al. 2017), such words sometimes act as placeholders, allowing for a degree of ambiguity as new emotions and expectations are explored and examined. Discussing her husband’s constant absence from the family home in the evening, a woman once said to me, “This was not the *understanding* we had.” Similarly, in discussing a mutual acquaintance’s unhappiness at being expected to look after her in-laws, someone said, “An *understanding* before does not mean a woman cannot express dissatisfaction after. So what if she had known his mother is old and needs care? If he *understands* her really, then this is asking too much.” In both instances, women discussed the term and thereby tacitly explored new kinds of expectations in married life. They reimagined love as suiting domesticity and marriage while aligning it with concerns over middle-class self-representations and aspirations for the future. Yet love also opened small possibilities of remaking relationships and renegotiating what is expected of women in a marriage, an idea we return to later.

Consumption and aspirations to consume play a central role in reworking intimacy as *understanding*, representing not only desires for upward mobility and “life success” (Ahearn 2001, 2003; Uberoi 2006) but also an overall intermingling of exchange and emotion (Cole 2004; Constable 2009). Romantic love was often articulated and envisioned through a lifestyle that was locally associated with a progressive nuclear family life. This included use and knowledge of products associated with modern domestic spaces, popular brands and spaces of living, and, most importantly, careful investment in children’s upbringing and education. These sites of consumption and investment offered a “blueprint” of romance (Illouz 1997, 249), one that featured in conversations and fantasies about the future as an *understanding* developed. Many of my interlocutors confessed that they would spend hours on the mobile phone late at night, talking about what their future life would look like. Men often promised that the couple would go to the

cinema together or frequent restaurants, touching on aspirations to consume a “modern” experience as much as to access spaces that most women were barred from, given the restrictions on their mobility. “He would tell me that he would take me to watch any film I liked, but if any man looked at me there, he would become the hero of the film and beat him up.” Many women indicated a desire to see a film or dinner “like a *couple*” or to put their head on their husband’s shoulder and hold hands—matching a form of togetherness seen in films and popular culture and associated with modern intimacy. The gifts given and exchanged also conformed to this image, a way of forging together an intimate project of social mobility (Osella 2012, 252) centered around a couple. For instance, Yasmeen saved up for months to buy trousers and a shirt for her partner, Taha, to wear to work. “Other supervisors at the shoe factory that we worked in often wore Western wear, but Taha had felt too shy to do the same,” Yasmeen told me. She laughingly said he looked *handsome* in *suiting* but also said she wanted him to fit in. Her gift encapsulated her personal taste in what constitutes modern dress, but it also reflected a desire to be a part of his success and to make him blend into his modern work environment.

Recasting Viviana Zelizer’s (2005) insights on the intersections between the monetary and the intimate, we may say that consumption remediates and manages expectations of love in postmarital life. This is visible especially in relation to the English words mentioned above that have entered the lexicon of *understandings*, such as *caring*. Ideas of care remained gendered and contiguous with traditional roles cast on men and women but reimagined in their focus on consumption. For men, to be caring implied an ability to provide the family with the means and amenities of modern life. In describing how they felt cared for, women often spoke of how their husbands took them out to restaurants or said that, no matter how tired their husbands were after work, they escorted them for a stroll or took them shopping at the megastores, such as Hyperstar and Metro, that have proliferated in recent years. Similarly, as evidence of their husband’s care, they spoke of their children attending private schools or tuition academies, dressing in nice clothes, and frequenting children’s recreational spots. In return, a woman’s care was understood in terms of knitting together an intimate unit with the consumption made possible by the man. As they took care of daily housework, women were careful to use the right products for their family and often talked about the *care* and attention they gave these tasks. For instance, a woman once mentioned that, when washing clothes, she used a different—more expensive—detergent for her children and husband’s clothes, but an ordinary one for the larger joint family. Similarly, others spoke of how they would buy their children special snacks, such as chicken nuggets and instant noodles, and store them separately so as not to share them with the joint family. The

world of intimacy, rather than being separated from the monetary, hinges on it.

Concealment, romance, and opportunity

Love as *understanding* thus offers a perspective on how women, with limited options, endeavor to negotiate wider economic uncertainty and inadequate state support through marital and intimate relations. In this regard, it dovetails with several recent ethnographies that, breaking the boundary between “affect and exchange” (Thomas and Cole 2000, 20), highlight how women forge and reconfigure intimate relations amid rapidly changing economic and political circumstances (Constable 2009; Faier 2009, 2007; Visweswaran 1994). As in these descriptions, here, too, concealing intention and agency is an integral strategy. In others context, however, these strategies allow for greater female autonomy and independence (Archambault 2013; Cole 2004; Rhine 2016; Thomas and Cole 2009, 20–24), even if with ambivalent consequences (Faier 2009). In Lahore they lead to a further entrenchment within normative binds of comportment and social relationships.

Recent work has complicated the idea that love marriages in South Asia represent individual freedom. Perveen Mody (2008), for instance, has argued that agency comes with a sense of accountability felt toward the family and community, and that eloping women often conceal their own agency through claims of abduction. Similarly, Asha Abeyasekera (2016) notes that agency in love marriages is deployed as a narrative device to display an individualized subjectivity, but it is experienced as a burden, since women feel the responsibility of making the right decision for the family. These pressures are also visible in premarital actions and representations in Lahore, although not in the ways documented by Mody and Abeyasekera. Women conceived of love as *understanding* and identified attractive qualities in men that matched with a broader middle-class outlook; their choices thus concurred with the family’s collective investment in upward mobility. But their accounts can also be viewed as narrative devices intended to justify their actions as responsible and to preserve their personal morality (Carey 2012). Many women talked about their partner’s attractive physical qualities—the most common of which, again in English, were *broad shouldered, tall, green eyes* (achieved through contact lenses). Many said they had been drawn to them at first sight. Yet, in their narratives, the decision to act on this responsiveness was deliberated—the image being of a thinking, moral stance, not a flight of fancy. They commonly distinguished their decision from *filmī dīwānagī* (film-like craziness), that is to say, the kind of love depicted in Bollywood films. Maintaining their moral high ground, most women would claim that their actions and choices were nothing like the immoral and, often, irrational behavior depicted as love in Bollywood films. Theirs

was a *soć samajh ka faisla* (reasoned decision). The irony in this would not be missed by those familiar with Bollywood films, in which the heroine’s behavior is often legitimized and represented as moral by contrasting her with another female character who is depicted as unreserved and as disregarding social mores.

But if morality is preserved in these accounts by displaying rational and deliberated decision-making, it was simultaneously kept intact by concealing agency. The same women who spoke of developing an *understanding* as a reasoned decision would recount that they had never intended any of this, that it was something that “just happened to them” or that had been brought on by the intensity of feelings on both sides. This meant that it was the man who almost always made the first move and that he was, often, initially rebuked. During my fieldwork many a woman told me she was “not the type of person to do this” and that it was all of her own accord. Women excitedly told me about when they were first approached by their (now) husbands, and about how they had told the man to never speak to them because they were “not that kind of girl.” In fact, they would often say their husband had chosen them precisely because they were not “that kind of girl.” As one interlocutor recounted, “He told me he had approached me because I was so innocent and uninterested. [...] He said that the moment he looked at me, he knew that I was not the kind of girl interested in a *cākar* [an affair], and this is what drew him.”

Rather than simply being a narrative ploy, this process of rejecting the man and his reacting with insistence was an integral part of “feeling” (Pernau 2017), experiencing, and articulating the pains and pleasures of romance. Recounting the early phases of the relationship, women often spoke of how they were both scared and excited by the man’s insistence. They said they had never imagined that they could incite such deep emotions and feelings in a man and did not know how to handle it. “He would say things like ‘I will die if I cannot be with you,’ and I would feel so overwhelmed that someone could feel this way about me, but also scared that he might do something stupid because of me.” As the *understanding* developed, the intensity of feelings was often described in terms of the effort that the man made to know where the woman was going. To make a point about the man’s feelings for them, women often confided how hurt and angry their partner would get if they did not answer his phone calls or had gone somewhere (with their family) without telling him. Once, when I made a face at such a description and asked if it had felt too controlling, my interlocutor replied, “When a man really cares for you, he really loves you, this is how he is ... no man wants his woman to be out of his reach ever.” While love as *understanding* steered clear of annihilating the self, since it was embedded within the domain of marital expectations, it was experienced and articulated, in the relationship, through women’s giving up

their personal autonomy. As one interlocutor put it, “If you love and are loved, you want to be kept in his protection.”

This broader combination—of a relationship that “just happened on its own accord” and the need to preserve one’s reputation—means that women feel pressured to make the right decision from the outset (cf. Abeyasekera 2016; Mody 2008). While others have noted the rise of new kinds of marriage mediators in uncertain times (Dyson 2018; Maunaguru 2019), the main way that women managed these concerns was by drawing on the familiar—literally familial and kin networks. The constraints of gender segregations and limited mobility have been considerably eased with access to social media and mobile phones, and my interlocutors amply used these media after an *understanding* had developed, but they rarely relied on them to “meet” men. Although some women did develop romances and eventually married men they met through random dialing or Facebook chat, the predominant trend was meeting someone known to the family and, in particular, to cousins (usually those outside the joint family). Weddings, family functions, and gatherings—where there is some intersex interaction without much supervision—were common places for initial contact. This was followed, sometimes in an immediate sequence, with an exchange of phone numbers.

For instance, Farhana, whom I met when she was already engaged to her first cousin, Ali, had known her fiancé for years before they had an *understanding*. He had lived in Muzaffarabad, in Azad Kashmir, while Farhana lived in Lahore, but they would meet at family gatherings and special occasions. When they were both 18, his family came to stay with Farhana’s to attend a wedding on her father’s side of the family. She explained how, during the time leading to the wedding, all the cousins would be together all the time, often going out for ice cream or staying up all night playing cards or Ludo. It was during this period when they started liking each other, although nothing was said at this point. When Ali left after the wedding, he sent Farhana a text message. “It was just a simple text,” she said. “He only said hello in it ... by that time, I knew what he was like, and I knew he was *sincere*, so I replied.” After messaging each other for some weeks, they began talking regularly on the phone.

Forming *understandings* within familiar networks not only reduced the chances of being catfished but also provided means for running background checks and securing future happiness. As women who had been brought up in a joint family, and who were aware that there would be similar living arrangements in their married life, most wanted to know the larger family that they might join. This, as I recounted in my opening vignette, was the case with Samra, who had an *understanding* with her sister’s brother-in-law before marrying him. The presence of her sister in that home had offered her a window on her future life there and on the house’s socioeconomic position. Her other sister had been married into a family that rarely allowed daughters-

in-law to leave the house, and even visits to their parents’ homes were curtailed. Samra had decided that she did not want such a life for herself and, even though she had liked Sherafghan from the moment she saw him, knowledge of his home environment through her sister had pushed her toward accepting his advances.

These women’s reliance on the familiar to advance their intimate aspirations unsettles many anthropological suppositions about the tensions and oppositions between individual and collective interests. In their analysis of transnational alliances among British Pakistanis, for example, Shaw and Charsley (2006) highlight that Muslim cousin marriages—perceived as exemplifying collective structural strategies—are, in fact, an outcome of a variety of individual emotional connections (*rishta*) between kin and across generations. Here too, kin connections and experiences influence individual choices and strategies, as is visible in Samra’s discussion of her sister’s marriage. Moreover, young women rely on kin connections to pursue their intimate aspirations. This is not only for initiating a romance but also, as the next section details, for successfully transforming it into a marriage. The caveat, however, remains that by deploying these strategies, women enclose themselves further in the very institutions and modes of comportment that limit their options. These concerns draw us back to questions of agency, structure, and desire, a puzzle from which we started and now reexplore.

Selected privacy, silence, and kinship

For the young women I spoke to, kinship is a double bind—they use it to reach out from the very defined space that it sanctions for them. This makes kinship a complex terrain, one that my interlocutors navigate through what is often referred to as “negotiated solidarity” (Raheja 1997).

Understandings were initially conducted without the knowledge of family elders, although some relatives were brought in at a later stage. But the support and complicity of kin who were of similar age—for instance, cousins, sisters, and sisters-in-law—were vital for the initial stages of *understandings*. Most interactions were over the phone and, because of confined living arrangements and limited privacy, the conversations usually happened late at night and in the presence of sisters and cousins of the joint family. This was out of both necessity and safety, since one sister could warn the other that someone was about to enter the room or, if anyone found them awake, claim that they had been talking to each other. Like sisters, sisters-in-law—the wives of married brothers—were useful accomplices, especially because they were often close in age and because their married status conferred more authority on them. Among families that considered a young sister-in-law to be an adequate chaperone, she could sometimes help carry out a surreptitious meeting. Several interlocutors revealed leaving the house,

under the pretext of clothes shopping, and then meeting their partner at a designated spot, such as an ice cream parlor, while the sister-in-law sat at a separate table.

It is inviting to think of these instances as solidarity among women, in a context in which they were all surveilled and had tenuous positions in the family. But these alliances, although they reflect empathy and perhaps a degree of criticism of the kinship structure's harshness, were "negotiated," changing with time, position, and circumstance. When they offered help, older sisters-in-law almost always kept their own situation in the household in mind. Was their position in the house secure enough for them to take such a risk? Could they use this opportunity strategically to build alliances among in-laws? Equally, their motivations included the calculation that if the romance culminated in a successful marriage, they would be viewed as instrumental in securing a good match for the daughter of the house. Additionally, given that relationships and marriages tended to occur within family circles, the romance was often conducted with someone related to the sister-in-law. And their support changed with circumstance: for instance, I knew someone who helped the daughter of the house in an *understanding* but stopped when she realized her mother-in-law wanted to arrange another match.

For women who aspired to advance their *understanding* into a marriage, the support they garnered from others, and thus their ultimate success, depended on skillful discretion and on upholding norms and notions of gendered morality. This meant giving utmost importance to keeping their reputation intact and to condemning others who were not equally discreet in their dealings. Not only did this make it easier to garner support from other women, such as sisters-in-law, since it decreased the chances of getting caught, but it also provided access to spaces of selected privacy and privileged silence. In a similar fashion, family members normalize the disruption caused by love marriages to wider kinship structures by performing them as arranged to the wider family and public (Donner 2002, 2016; Marsden 2007; Mody 2008). The disruption is thus swallowed by the "practical logic of kinship," to use Veena Das's (1995, 65) reading of Pierre Bourdieu (1977). For *understandings* to succeed in Pakistan, there had to be a certain kind of accepted ambiguity and sanctioned privacy in relations between genders and across generations.

Once the man in an *understanding* has secured his family's support and is ready to formally propose, the woman confides in an older woman in the family, usually a mother or aunt, to act as a mediator and communicate the family's willingness to the men in the suitor's family and, if need be, to convince them of the match's suitability. In these circumstances, daughters reveal the *understanding* to the mothers, who might then discreetly tell the father, yet everyone continues to act as if no one knows anything. Neither is it ever fully revealed how much anyone knows or for how

long. For instance, many of my interlocutors believed that their mothers had probably known or, at the very least, had some sense of their daughter's *understanding* beforehand, but did not say anything until they were directly told about the matter. Likewise, many fathers probably had an inkling that their daughter was previously involved with the suitor, but unless they strongly objected to the match, they rarely asked directly about the relationship. There were many instances in which the whole family was aware that the couple had an *understanding* but never publicly acknowledged that they knew about it until after the marriage had taken place.

Understandings thus succeed by gaining access to spaces that are available beneath normative structures precisely by playing through their rules. The structures of silence and semiprivacy that I have described allow laxity in pursuing interests that break the norms, but only as long as they do not represent any direct challenge. Any visible flouting of the norms or challenge to male authority can have detrimental consequences for all involved, ranging from deterioration of relations to more serious incidents of long-term restrictions on movements and physical abuse. For instance, one of my interlocutors' marriage proceedings had started, and all was going well, when a male relative discovered love letters that the couple had written to each other and showed them to the father. My interlocuter told me that her father probably had known about the *understanding* when the proposal came but did not mind till "everything came out in the open." The father then called off the whole wedding. My interlocuter's phone was confiscated, and she was rarely allowed out of the house, even when accompanied by the mother.

Older women have a more visible presence in marriage arrangements and proceedings, but the ultimate authority of acceptance rests with the men. There is, however, room here for subtly influencing and convincing men, which, again, is possible only if *understandings* occur behind the scenes, through silences and discretion. Many of my interlocutors, worried that their fathers would reject the proposal, often relied on their connections with older women for support. This was the case with Sajida, who had married her love interest, Mohammad, whom she had met at her paternal aunt's daughter's wedding. Mohammad was from the aunt's extended in-laws' family. Sajida has been apprehensive about whether her father would accept the proposal—a previous love marriage in the family had ended in an acrimonious divorce, leaving him skeptical of such alliances. She asked her paternal aunt to help in the matter, since she was very close to her brother. The aunt decided that the best way forward was that, instead of mentioning the *understanding*, she told her brother that she had suggested Sajida to Mohammad's family. The father would then be obliged to support a beloved sister in front of her in-laws. Even if he guessed that something else was afoot, which I suspected

he had, the overall appearance was of a man fulfilling his responsibilities toward his sister.

To realize their romantic goals, women draw on spaces and connections that are found within, rather than outside or through, a disruption of the everyday normative. The practical logic of kinship allows space for contradictory motivations and individual interests, as long as these do not directly challenge the overall codes of comportment. In looking for help from other women in the family, or making use of men's silence, my interlocutors did not display a "feminist consciousness." Rather they drew on shifting positionalities among their kin, and the emotions, connections, and alliances that bound family members to one another.

The possibilities and constraints of love

My aim here has not been to present *understandings* as successful or to convey any sense of feminist optimism, but to unravel the kind of agency that *understandings* represent, the experience they enable, and the conditions of possibilities that they open in an environment of limited options. In fact, as I have suggested throughout, the dreams of a nuclear family lifestyle and the consumption choices they engender are met only through living in the joint families that make it difficult to live alone. A year after I had completed my fieldwork, I revisited an interlocutor, Rabia, whose husband had recently gotten a promotion that relocated him to a different city. I was surprised that Rabia had decided to stay in the joint family home instead of leaving with him, but she explained that the expenses of maintaining a separate family home were too much with a small baby to think about. "What woman does not want her own house?" she said. Her in-laws cared in part for the baby, providing help that she would have lacked in her own house. At the same time, however, she was concerned about the added expense. "But we want to send him to a good school, and there are other things," she said. Pointing toward a bag of diapers under the bed, she remarked that she could now afford an expensive brand when, previously, she had been using the same cloth nappies as her sisters-in-law. "They are still using those," she said, "but thankfully we can afford better for our son now." While most cannot find enough economic security to move out even after a decade of marriage, the ones who do, like Rabia, often feel caught between the independence of a nuclear family life and its fantasized lifestyle.

It would, however, be unfair to dismiss *understandings* altogether for being constrained by the very desires and ideals that have led to such relations. In knitting together differing aspirations, in which economics and emotions are entwined, they offer potentialities for partaking in a life that is otherwise unavailable, at least to some extent. *Understandings* make it possible to experience the pleasures, excitement, and feelings of modernity, even as

they tether the dangerous potential of desire to the economically secure arrangement of a conventional marriage. All the same, *understandings* leave some room for reevaluating notions of reciprocities within "traditional" marital alliances, sites to grapple with the changing emotions and needs as families negotiate an uncertain and precarious economic environment. The kinds of desires that *understandings* encapsulate, and how desires are pursued, reveal notions of agency and action that fit neither liberal traditions of autonomous action—calling for a break away or freedom from the structure—nor the recently popularized notion of nonliberal agency (Mahmood 2001, 2005), which calls for self-cultivation within the power structure. Although these women self-cultivate in prescribed styles of gendered comportment and morality, they do so to garner support for desires and ambitions in the very normative structures, such as kinship and the joint family, that otherwise bar them from such pursuits. In this respect, love as *understanding* reflects an agency—a sense of hope and transformative desire—that persists within the constraints of normative behavior. Love as *understanding* upholds norms and social sanctions just as it seeks to overcome them. In doing so it represents a form of transgression that lingers within the "traditional."

Notes

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1. 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 that people spoke in otherwise Urdu or Punjabi sentences have been italicized. All translations are my own.

2. In urban areas reports are on the increase of violence against women and men under the trope of "honor." Love marriages, without the approval of families, often incite such violence—in 2014, for example, a woman was stoned to death by a crowd outside the Lahore High Court, and in 2017 a woman was shot dead by her brother outside the court. Aurat Foundation, a local NGO, estimated that at least 1,000 women were killed in 2014 in the name of "honor" (Reuters 2014).

3. I am mindful here that joint family arrangements in Pakistan are not limited to the new middle class, although that is the demographic in which they are the norm. In upper-class families, joint family arrangements arise from the need to look after elderly parents, but it is not considered unusual for children to live away from their parents. In new middle-class families, however, joint family living is a moral norm.

4. *Aṣl* literally means “real” or “original,” something that harks back to its foundation or essence. In Urdu the term has esoteric connotations, symbolizing the pure love of Sufis for Allah. Within romantic contexts, *aṣl* is used to talk of a love that exhibits the same selfless and pure tendencies.

5. Across this fieldwork, I often found instances in which women had left midway while developing an *understanding*. Their actions could, here, appear as instances of *timepass*, and some jokingly or subtly indicated that this had been the case. But in most cases this was explained as a mistake or an error in judgment of the man’s character.

6. *Gazal* refers to the Persianized form of amatory poems that are sung and recited and were popularized in South Asia during Mughal times. *Dāstān* is a way of narrating or writing a story or a fable, recounting historical or past events. In Pakistan, *gazal* are often set to music, played on cassettes in cars and on the radio, and shared on the Internet and social media platforms. Popular *dāstān* and their characters are often referred to in everyday conversation, especially in relation to exemplary behavior and traits.

7. In the Urdu poetic and emotive tradition, the much-described emotions of love and passion typically exist outside domestic and familial domains (Dalmia 2006). This is reflected in everyday language: love is never talked about directly, and in Urdu there is no equivalent of the direct “I love you.”

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Ammara Maqsood
 UCL Anthropology
 University College London
 14 Taviton Street
 London, WC1H 0PY, United Kingdom
 a.maqsood@ucl.ac.uk