

Marriage, the Islamic advice literature and its women readers

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Abstract

This article draws from my study of marital breakdown in South Asian Muslim families in Britain, in which I found women engaging with an Islamic advice literature about marriage, much of which develops themes which were established in the reformist literature from colonial India, but redirects these themes to stem a recent tide of divorce. In the long haul of difficult marriages, I found women to be educating themselves about and working themselves into the mould of this literature, but also using these teachings in ways that diverge from the stated intentions of the authors, taking this literature as a benchmark of what a wife should expect from a husband and considering their infraction just cause for ending their marriages, or finding legitimacy for remarriage, rather than reversing the contemporary swell in divorce. Engaging debates over the work of Saba Mahmood and her critics, the everyday here appears to be resistive, in contrast with the patient submission of the religious virtuoso. It becomes clear, however, that women inscribe their moves towards divorce and remarriage within, rather than in opposition to Islamic norms and values.

Keywords

Gender; divorce; marriage; Islam; readership; reception; everyday life

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Biographical note

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In their recent 'notes on an anthropological divide', Fadil and Fernando (2015) offer a critique of the vein of scholarship on 'everyday Islam', arguing that the eagerness with which many scholars have leapt to point out people's slippages from pious Islamic practice reveals unexamined secular-liberal sensibilities and norms. Relatedly, they suggest the importance of Saba Mahmood's (2005) complex work on the women's *da`wa* movement in Egypt which, far from seeking out instances of escape from pious discourse by 'everyday' Muslims, problematises 'the universality of the desire... to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination' (Mahmood 2005, p. 10). In this article, I address these questions about the coordinates of freedom and agency in Muslim women's lives, specifically in situations of marital breakdown. The context is a study of marital breakdown among British South Asians, mostly of Pakistani Muslim heritage. Whereas four percent of ever-married British Asians were separated or divorced in the mid-1990s (Berthoud 2000, p.3 and 13), in 2010-13 the percentage was ten percent among British Pakistani Muslims, making levels of marital breakdown in this population approximately the same as that of the White British majority in the mid-1990s (Qureshi 2016, p.3-4; the percentages for the other British Asian groups were Indian Sikh: ten percent, Bangladeshi Muslims: eight percent, Indian Muslims: seven percent, Indian Hindus: six percent). In what follows, I examine women engaging with Islamic norms about marriage over the course of protracted marital difficulties. Whilst *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) lays down detailed prescriptions concerning the conditions in which divorce is permissible, much Islamic discourse also stresses the detested character of divorce. In the long-term of difficult marriages, women engaging with this Islamic tradition face challenges about the correct way of facing their husbands and dilemmas about separation, divorce and remarriage. Their routes through these dilemmas speak illuminatingly to these debates about 'everyday Islam'.

For Fadil and Fernando, Mahmood's ethnography offers an exemplary study of the 'daily ruminations, conversations, and difficulties women and men encounter in their ethical journeys and demonstrate how these are informed by a constant engagement with the Islamic tradition' (Fadil and Fernando 2015, p. 63). Of particular relevance are Mahmood's reflections about how the women of the *da`wa* movement urge one another to consider marital difficulties a trial through which they may cultivate the Islamic virtue of *sabr* (patience or endurance). This is an exemplary illustration of how the women's engagement with Islamic discourse permeates daily problems, such as having a husband who objects to

their attendance at a mosque study group or drinks alcohol. Mahmood argues that their practice of *sabr* is not passive, but an act of active submission to the divine, and that such practices must be regarded as agential, but in the mode of agency exemplified by the novice pianist – who submits herself to a painful regime of disciplinary practice in order to acquire the ability to play the instrument. Mahmood argues for a move away from a dualistic framework in which norms are conceptualized on the model of doing and undoing, consolidation and subversion, to think about ‘the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated’ (Mahmood 2005, p. 23, and see Werbner, this volume, for an extended discussion of Mahmood’s work). Ground-breakingly, Mahmood’s argument parochialises the habits of much feminist thought that has sought out and emphasised instances of agency that are indexed by acts of resistance. For Mahmood, agency lies not in the efforts of the self, but in the discourse that ‘summons’ the self:

The kind of agency I am exploring here does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located. The women are summoned to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions, and... the individual is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts. (Mahmood 2005, p. 32)

My own interest in marital breakdown came out of my doctoral research with British Pakistani men and women suffering chronic ill health, where I found people relating much embodied distress to marital conflict, separations and divorce (Qureshi 2016, 2018). Like Mahmood, I found women, in particular, insisting that ill health was a trial from God to be faced with *sabr*. However, on the long-term of daily life faced with the relentless, interminable symptoms of chronic ill-health and the problem of negotiating care from their families, I found women lapsing from their stated ideal of *sabr* and signalling, often very subtly, in order to make their family members aware of the extent of their self-sacrifice and silent suffering, in ways that succeeded in securing attention. Echoing Werbner’s (this volume) critical argument about the ‘paradox of ascetic self-denial’ in Mahmood’s work, in my earlier article (Qureshi 2013), I suggested that women’s self-denial and self-mastery gave a capacity for power and authority over others. I felt there to be some friction with Mahmood’s interpretations of *sabr* which, though emphasising the ‘variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited’ (Mahmood 2005, p. 23), seemed to exclude appreciation of women’s tactical and reflexive uses of *sabr* in the long-term of unhappy family life. I questioned Mahmood’s insistence that agency inheres not in the women themselves but in the discourse that subjectivates them. Moreover, echoing the literature on ‘everyday Islam’, I

argued that women's slips from the ideal were resistive (Marsden 2005; Schielke 2009; Simon 2009). However, Fadil and Fernando (2015) contend that this type of argument rests on a selective application of the concept of 'the everyday', which acts here as 'a normative frame that enables the restoration of a conceptualization of agency primarily understood as creative resistance to (religious) norms' (p. 65). Whilst the 'everyday Islam' literature is often inexplicit about the concept, as Fadil and Fernando (2015) and Liebelt and Werbner (this volume) observe, if we attempt to pin 'the everyday' down through the canonical French literature of de Certeau (1984) or Bourdieu (1977, 1984) we may appreciate how creativity and resistance work through the everyday, but still need to account for actors, who are caught in the webs of 'doxa' or taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world.

In light of this critique, in this article, I revisit the question of how women engage with Islamic traditions in the long-haul of difficult family life. In my book, I detail how my interlocutors engaged with a range of Islamic norms concerning marriage, from the responsibilities of husbands and wives, to the detestable nature of divorce, the right to divorce in certain situations, the encouragement to remarriage, and the guardianship and child care-taking rights going to the father in cases of all but very young children (Qureshi 2016, pp. 77-8, 107-9, 158, 171, 177-8, 190, 215-6, 271 and 275). As Bolognani and Mellor, (2012) have also observed, among some women, this was also part of an intergenerational conversation drawing distinctions between patriarchal 'cultural' traditions and reformed, enlightened Islamic practice: the 'religion versus culture' contrast. As I detail in the book (Qureshi 2016), people did not simply follow the rules, and the Islamic model for marriage posed challenges to them that were not easily answered, but they felt the Islamic tradition to be authoritative.

In this article, I offer a more focused reflection on women's engagement with this tradition, but through a specific lens, namely their reading and interpretation of an Islamic advice literature on marriage. In this regard, Fadil and Fernando's (2015) return to de Certeau (1984) is particularly suggestive. For de Certeau, reading is exactly the kind of activity that shows us people in their everyday lives adopting 'tactics' to reappropriate the 'strategies' emanating from centres of power and make them habitable. In the reader's wandering gaze, he 'poaches' into another person's text, 'is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it' (p. xxi) in ways that turn him from passive object into active user of the text. Indeed, parallel conversations have taken place in studies of readership and reception that echo these debates about agency in Muslims' lives. Studies have often emphasized readers' agency as indexed by the control they exercise over the meaning of the texts, for example. Radway's (1991) ethnography of women readers of romance fiction was inspired by her insight that a literary

analysis of the books did not reveal what women took away from reading them, whilst Rose (2001) and Feely's (2010) work on 19th and early 20th century Britain shows working class readers transforming the meanings of books, reapplying the ideas in them so as to address the issues immediately important to them. But chafing at this type of analysis, in his ethnography of the Henry Williamson literary society, Reed (2004) foregrounds how readers may 'look forward to being *acted upon* (crucially affected by the experience of reading)... [by] other actors (perhaps the author, a character, the text...)' (p. 113, my emphasis).

I first became aware of the Islamic literature about marriage in 2010, when I – a white English woman – married into a Pakistani Muslim family and was recommended and gifted copies of Islamic marriage manuals. In 2012, when I began the research on marital breakdown, I found the same titles being circulated actively amongst British South Asian Muslim women. They were stocked in the Islamic bookshops and lent out from the public libraries in East London and Peterborough, where I carried out the fieldwork. They were also invoked spontaneously in the interviews. Numerous volumes were available, some with English titles, such as *Islamic marriage*, *Blissful marriage: a practical Islamic guide*, *Marital life of the Holy Prophet*, *Marital discord: causes and resolutions* and *Gift for a Muslim bride*, and some in Urdu, such as *Islami shaadi* (Islamic marriage), *Kamyaab shaadi ke satra asool* (Seventeen rules for a successful marriage), *Islami dulhan* (Islamic bride) and *Tohfa barai dulhan* (Present for the wife). Typically these books are printed in Delhi, Karachi or Lahore and then shipped to Islamic bookshops overseas. Most are written for women readers, and include gift copies intended to be given as part of wedding trousseaux, such as *Gift for the Muslim couple*. Complementary volumes written for men, such as *Gift for a Muslim groom* or *Islami dulha* (Islamic groom), can also be found. The transnationalism of the contemporary advice literature is nothing new. Judith Walsh (2004) compares the late 19th century Bengali advice literature with English texts such as Mrs Beeton's 1861 *Book of household management*, or Catherine Beecher's American manuals, and demonstrates that all of the texts propagate a similar discourse about civilized domesticity being the hallmark of modernity. Walsh's point is that not just the Indian manuals, but all the manuals of this era are hybrid texts bringing 'a transnational discourse to bear on local concerns' (p. 26).

There are other parallels between these contemporary marriage manuals and the 19th century prescriptive literature that Walsh examines in India. Historians have emphasised that the 19th century literature reflects reformists' preoccupations with women as markers of community identity and status (O'Hanlon 1992). In Bengal, Hindu reformers elevated women to a symbol of duty and tradition (Mani 1990; Chakrabarty 1993; Chatterjee 1993). The

preoccupations of Muslim reformers were much the same, as Gail Minault (1986) has shown. The Muslim reformers drew from the *ashrafia*, the former Mughal service gentry who were from the 1830s onward incorporated into British rule. Minault observes that as the *ashrafia* transformed themselves into a bureaucratic and professional middle class, they sought to distinguish themselves from the *nawabi* elite who had, as the *ashrafia* saw it, squandered their power, by reconceiving of the virtue of ‘nobility’ (*sharif*, plural *ashraf*) as not a prerogative by birthright but an achievement by virtue of refinement and culture. For the reformists, the refashioning of women was as important as purified religion. The initial impetus for women’s reform was from men, as is illustrated by the didactic fiction that emerged at the time – novels such as Deputy Nazir Ahmed’s 1869 *Mirat-ul-Arus* (The bride’s mirror) – as well as the manuals of the period – most importantly Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi’s 1905 *Bahishti zewar* (Heavenly ornaments), which provides the template for the genre of contemporary marriage manuals I examine here – although women began to contribute more actively and critically by the mid-20th century.

In exploring the Islamic advice literature and women’s reading practices, I speak to a fascinating literature on the production and circulation of texts in Muslim societies, highlighting issues such as the empowerment of the *ulema* (scholars) through print media but also their simultaneous decline in authority due to the spread of public literacy (Robinson 1993; Messick 1997; Bang 2011; Hirschler 2012). More specifically, I speak to a small set of studies which have identified the persistence of themes from the 19th century reformist literature in contemporary literary genres, but also explored the reception of these texts. Patricia Jeffery et al. (2004) show the continuities with the textbooks used today in girls’ madrassas in North India and suggest that the dispositions valorised in the textbooks are viewed as affectations completely ‘out of kilter with the realities of village life’ (p. 43). Kamran Asdar Ali (2004) observes the continuities in fictional Urdu women’s digests, whilst Kiran Ahmed (2018) shows how readers are moved so deeply by the digests that they cultivate friendships with the writers, generating involved conversations in which writers and readers think together through what it means to be a woman in contemporary Pakistan.

This combined analysis of texts and their reception is the approach I adopt in this article. In the first half I analyse the Islamic literature about marriage and the intentions of the authors, and in the second I explore how women read, engaged with and deployed these books over the course of protracted marital difficulties. In the discussion, I interrogate this material against Mahmood’s work and that of her critics, returning to these questions about whether ‘the everyday’ should be characterised as a space of creative resistance.

Islamic marriage manuals

The contemporary marriage manuals show striking continuities with the 19th century texts, particularly with Thanawi's 1905 *Bahishti zewar* (Heavenly ornaments), not least because so many are directly derivative of this text, published under the name of Thanawi but actually written by his followers. I therefore begin with some analysis of this important text.

Bahishti zewar (Heavenly ornaments)

In her translation and commentary, Barbara Metcalf (1990) explains that Thanawi, one of the most famous figures of the 19th century Deobandi movement, wrote *Bahishti zewar* to provide basic education for respectable Muslim women. It became a classic gift for Muslim brides, who 'entered their husband's home with the Holy Qur'an in one hand and the *Bahishti zewar* in the other' (p. 3). Little is known about the contemporary readership of *Bahishti zewar* or about their reading practices. Metcalf suggests that 'once a document for the privileged families who supported the reformist movement, over time it has been read by the more humble and the more remote' (Metcalf 1990, p. 38). Jeffery et al. (2004) suggest of *Bahishti zewar* that 'the personal (sectarian) affiliation of the writer seems to matter little to the audience' (p. 3). My experience in the British context underlines both these claims. Whilst Thanawi's text denounces many aspects of Shia devotional practice, for example, in 2011 I heard a cautionary tale from *Bihishti zewar* being cited in a marriage guidance programme on the British Shia channel Hidayat, demonstrating that the circulation and impact of the text far exceeds its Deobandi sectarian-affiliated readership.

Bahishti zewar is a tome of religious and family law, and it also presents descriptions of pious women and passages criticizing the domestic arrangements of turn-of-the-century urban Muslim families, which are of great historical interest. The editions that I found in East London and Peterborough have been drastically cut down, and perhaps surprisingly, the sections in current circulation are the mirror image of the sections that Metcalf deems worthy of commentary. Metcalf misses out Part 4 on *nikah* (marriage), yet it is this section that does the rounds today both in Urdu and in the common English translations.

Thanawi's chapter on *nikah* aims simply to communicate the correct teachings from the Hanafi sharia. Five pages of hadith on the importance of *nikah* and how God looks mercifully upon those who are married precedes fifteen dense pages on divorce, which stress how detested divorce is by God and the legally binding nature of uttering the words *talaaq* (divorce). The chapter on *nikah* concludes with some interesting sections on 'the rights of the

husband' and 'the method of living with one's husband'. 'The rights of the husband' establishes that a woman should consider her husband the *majazi khuda* (God on earth):

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'were I to command anyone to prostrate to anyone other than Allah, I would have commanded the woman to prostrate to her husband'. (Thanawi 2003, p.422)

In 'the method of living with one's husband', Thanawi shifts to a more intimate style, appreciating the strains of married life, and offers more plain-talking advice, including 25 teachings encouraging women not to confront their husbands and showing them how to win them around and secure their love. Rather than a non-resistive practice of submission to the divine, Thanawi presents *sabr* as a route not only to religious merit but also, through the moral authority a wife will accrue, a way to turn the tables in the marriage:

In Lucknow, there is a woman whose husband is extremely immoral. He spends all his time in the company of a prostitute... This poor wife does not take any offence to this... and never even complains. Now, you see for yourself, how all the people around her must be praising her, let alone the reward that she will receive from Allah. The day Allah guides this husband of hers and he gives up this illicit relationship, he will definitely return to his wife and become her slave. (Thanawi 2003, p. 427)

The contemporary marriage manuals reiterate the themes of *Bahishti zewar* but also offer variations, updating Thanawi's teachings to the demands of the present.

Muslim marriage guide

Ruqaiyya Waris Maqsood's *Muslim marriage guide* (2000) was the most widely circulated of the Islamic marriage manuals available in Britain. I was told that in the early 2000s, it was a popular gift for new brides. Published in Lahore by Talha Publications, it was written by a White English convert. Sister Ruqaiyya's stated motivation for writing the book is to help deter the tragedy of marital breakdown among Muslims that 'modern life' has brought:

Life amid the stresses of the modern world, particularly in our high-speed cities, places unprecedented strains on relationships. There is no point in being complacent and pointing to the high rates of breakdown of non-Muslim marriages. Many of these pressures are starting to bear down on *us*. (Maqsood 2000, p.113, original emphasis)

In terms very reminiscent of the 19th century literature, Ruqaiyya's call is to domesticity and submission to the husband, but unlike Thanawi, Ruqaiyya emphasizes that it is both husband *and* wife's duty as Muslims to adjust, compromise and practice patience. Ruqaiyya recognizes the temptation for wives to develop a 'martyrdom complex' (p. 40) but

admonishes women not to use their patience as grounds for demanding recognition from their husbands, again unlike Thanawi. Whether noticed by the husband or not, every patient act is noted in the celestial ledger; patient acceptance is ‘a bank balance in heaven’ (p. 111).

Ruqaiyya’s major intervention in the manual – and one of the best-read parts of the book, I am led to believe – is to give her female reader a sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure. Whilst sexuality is surely to be contained within marriage, she affirms that the fear of sexuality is Christian, rather than Islamic doctrine. In Chapter 9, ‘from sex to *sadaqa*’ (God-directed charity), she encourages a husband to take his time over the sexual act. She does however also urge her female readers to make a show of enthusiasm in the marital bed, so as not to hurt their husband’s feelings, which is the cause of many an errant husband’s straying from the path or polygamous marriages. All this, she advises, is central to sedimenting the character of a well-mannered Muslim wife. ‘Seems too much of a performance? After a little practice the skills just come naturally’ (Maqsood 2000, p. 110).

The second contemporary text, written in Urdu, presents a less intimate style.

Biwi ke haquq (The rights of the wife)

Biwi ke haquq (1992) was published by Memon Islamic Publishers in Karachi and authored by Sheikh ul Islam Maulana Mohammad Taqi Usmani. The book is written for a male reader, although it is evidently read by women too. It has 80 short chapters running through three main themes. The first ten chapters establish the concept of *hussn-e-salooq* (good treatment):

A verse was revealed: *wa-a-shiro hunna bil maaroof*. In this we are directed to do good treatment with women and to refrain from causing them trouble and difficulty.

This verse is the centre of the religious teaching, and the Prophet peace be upon him embodied this teaching through his words and his deeds. (Usmani 1992, p.17)

The following thirty chapters discuss the grounds of marital conflict from an Islamic perspective. Woman was created from the *teri pasli* (bent rib) of man. This is the root cause of all conflict between husbands and wives. The fact that Eve was made from Adam’s bent rib is not to devalue women: they are merely different from men (p. 21). The things that women say and do that irritate their husbands are not a reflection of their inadequacies, but rather, their natural and God-given differences from men. It follows that if a man tries to remould his wife in his own image, this will bring no good. Sheikh Usmani goes on to establish the Islamically correct procedure for a man who wishes to do *islah* (discipline his wife). In contrast with the *Muslim marriage guide*, and indeed with *Bahishti zewar*, it is striking that the only mention of the sexual relationship is in this context of doing *islah*.

Advise her with softness, good character and love. This is the first level of *islah*. If she reforms her character, then no further steps are necessary. If she does not, however, you should cease sleeping with her. If she is sensible, she will understand... If this second step does not work, you may move to the third level of *islah*. Our Prophet peace be upon him said in his last ever speech, that this is done as the last resort, and it should not be done in such a way as to cause suffering but with the intention to educate her, reform her and discipline her. A beating that leaves a mark is not permissible. (Usmani 1992, p. 31-3)

The third section establishes in some detail the rights and obligations of a husband vis-à-vis his wife. Drawing on *Bahishti zewar*, Usmani delivers some interesting Islamic teachings and points out that these go squarely in the face of conventionally understood responsibilities of a wife towards her husband, including the fact that serving one's husband's parents is virtuous for a woman but not her duty. The book ends with a prescription deterring divorce:

If you find yourself with a bad woman, the only thing that you may do is ask God for mercy. When you search for a wife, then, look for qualities of religion and god-fearingness. Respect her and value her, uphold her responsibilities and do *hussn-e-salooq*. (Usmani 1992, p. 81-2)

Women's reading practices

I now turn to excerpts from my interviews, to explore why women read this Islamic prescriptive literature, and what they take away from it. I will offer three examples.

Naila

I have known Naila for over a decade. Now in her early 60s, she has been a single mother for twenty years. She was born and educated in Pakistan, to degree level, and migrated to the UK in the early 1980s after marrying a man who was an outsider to her family. It was Naila's first marriage, but her husband was a divorcee with children. Naila had four children with him in the first decade after her marriage, before they separated. Naila's interviews suggest that she was quite profoundly disturbed by experiences of sexual control by her husband. Naila felt her husband had used the threat of returning to his ex-wife to coerce her to make herself sexually available whenever he wanted. She said she had only once hinted about these problems to a friend, in Pakistan, and that echoing the advice literature, the friend wrote back advising her to comply with her husband's demands:

I spoke to her [the friend] and she said that ‘Whatever has happened, stick by your husband. Because in our religion a man is allowed to have two or three wives.’ She told me not to deny my husband his rights, else he would go back to his ex-wife. She told me this, and this stayed in my mind always... I always complied with his wishes, never denied him... I was always concerned about his pleasure and not mine.

An important passage in my first interview with Naila was her discovery of the possibility of women experiencing sexual pleasure. Her husband had showed her an article about female orgasm in an English newspaper and then hid it away, a point she returned to repeatedly in the interviews as evidence that he was deliberately hiding knowledge from her, taunting her and testing her. In the following extract, Naila elaborates on the ways in which she tried to mould herself into the Islamic norm of fulfilling one’s husband’s sexual desire.

Now after ten years, when I got to know that women too can experience pleasure, I was devastated ... I used to comply with his wishes always, because our religion teaches us that a woman must always comply to a man’s desires. Even if a woman is travelling on a camel and her husband expresses his desire, even in such circumstances a wife should comply and never deny. In my mind I was always reminded of the words of the Prophet, peace be upon him.

She had worked on herself like this for ten years of marriage, she said, telling herself that it was a duty incumbent upon her as a Muslim woman to offer herself to her husband whenever he expressed sexual desire. But then she came across *Biwi ke haquq*, the Urdu marriage manual analysed above, which gave her sharper views about the unfairness of her marriage. Rummaging around on her bookshelf, Naila found her copy of the book and told me,

In this book, I learnt a husband should try to make his own cups of tea, he should not always give orders to his wife and expect her to serve him like a slave. When we give each other our rights, that’s how we learn to love each other.

Naila had also taken away from the book the importance of treating one’s wife fairly:

In the time of the Prophet, husbands and wives did not argue because they knew all of their rights. The Prophet, peace be upon him, gave each of his wives equal *haquq* (rights). There is a hadith about the household of the Prophet peace be upon him. His wife Zainab used to be the most beautiful and his wife Aisha was jealous. Now the Prophet peace be upon him was very fond of honey. His wife Zainab had some honey and she would give it to him to make him spend more time with her than with his other wives. So what did Aisha do? She made a scheme and she would tell him when he had eaten that honey, his mouth smelled bad. He was very conscious about such

things and he believed that it must have been the honey that gave his mouth this bad smell. So he resolved to stop eating honey. It was exactly at this point that a verse was revealed telling about the rights of wives. From there, we know that Islam teaches that a husband must do *insaf* (justice) with his wives.

The idea that a husband wishing to discipline his wife must first explain things to her nicely, then stop sleeping with her and only then beat her very lightly – a theme developed at great length in *Biwi ke haquq* – angered Naila even more. Later in the interview, she insisted that

If he is not happy with me, he should sleep separately from me, is it not? Yet he used to carry out violence on me, he used to suppress me and taunt me but he still made sure his desires were met, every single night. He is a very *chalaak* (crafty) man.

From Naila's interviews, we can glimpse ways in which she was, in the long-term of a very difficult marriage, working to mould herself into the Islamic norms for marital sexuality. But Naila learnt from the advice literature about the reciprocal responsibilities of husbands towards their wives, too. We see her taking away benchmarks of what a wife can expect from her husband, which served to further destabilise her already precipitous marriage. It is important to note that Naila's growing awareness of these benchmarks did not lead straight to divorce. Her husband gave her a triple *talaaq* divorce in the mid-1990s, but she has still not accepted it, as she had consulted a library book on Islamic jurisprudence which disqualified the triple *talaaq* on technical grounds. Since then, her husband has insisted that they are divorced, whilst she insists that they are merely separated. In the next example, by contrast, 43-year old Rani's consultation of the advice literature was explicitly part of a wife's quest for a divorce, and allowed her to convince her family of the legitimacy of doing so.

Rani

UK-born Rani is an articulate woman who got herself educated as a single mother in her 20s, making up for certain missed opportunities as a teenager. Rani said she had quite willingly married her mother's sister's son from Pakistan, but when he migrated to join her in the UK, they did not bond. They fought often about the money he was sending to his parents. Rani persevered with the marriage, but meanwhile, she was pursuing adult education, and this seemed to heighten her awareness of her discontent. She moved back to her parents' home, and her mother and brother's wife provided childcare whilst she went to university. It was around this time, she said, that she started 'reading up' about divorce in Islam. She had been separated from her husband for more than five years, but not thought to go a step further. She said it was the religious literature that helped her to make that decision. The literature had

allowed her to convince her parents about the legitimacy of divorce. She involved her parents closely in her move, especially her father, who she felt had been misled by the local cleric:

And at that point both my parents and myself never thought I could get a divorce, because we were taught ... 'taught' – blindly following, about the fact that it's the man's job to give a divorce. It was a five-year journey before I actually got the information through reading up about it, through talking to people, that actually I could initiate a divorce. So I did, after five years, initiate a divorce. That was a learning (education) for my father as well.

He said, 'I learnt more about my faith.' I'd come and speak to him and mother about it and he'd tell me what was happening in the mosque and so on, and they would talk about it and I'd say, 'Well that's not in the Qur'an. I can read it to you. Here you are, this is where it is. Can you go back and ask the Imam, because I'm not happy that they're saying this.' And dad would then take it back [to the Imam] and have a discussion, and so he himself was evolving in the process of my learning. It was kind of sharing the learning. And he'd challenge stuff, and he challenged that I wasn't supposed to get divorced. So I went back and I said, 'Dad I found this in the Qur'an, which says I have rights. If I'm not happy, just on the basis that I'm not happy, I can ask for a divorce. It's called *khul* rather than *talaaq*. Can you find out more?' So dad said he'd like to speak to the Imam, saying 'What's this *khul* about? How does it happen?' And then he found out there was this sharia council or someone, but that took forever. In the end, I just said, 'Look, let's do it this way', but dad was behind me. We got a mediator involved, got it sorted. Dad was there. Mum and dad were very, very supportive of the whole process. It was a long, drawn out process, but we eventually got the point of what we wanted, which was a divorce.

Rani says she took from the literature the idea that if a woman is not happy, 'just on the basis that' she is not happy, she can divorce. This is interesting given the emphasis in the literature on the detested character of divorce, its function as a last resort, and the onus on women to exercise patience. Revealingly, this excerpt indicates Rani using the advice literature to reform her parents' mistaken 'cultural' (i.e. un-Islamic, see Bolognani and Mellor 2012 on the 'religious versus culture' contrast) assumptions about divorce being a husband's prerogative. In the third example, Noreen is another woman drawing on the Islamic literature on marriage in order to change her family's opinions, this time about remarriage.

Noreen

Noreen was in her third marriage at the time of my research. Like Rani, Noreen had been prevented from studying as a teenager by her father. Now into her 40s, Noreen had recently started reading about Islam with the encouragement of her third husband.

I've read so much about Islam now. If someone tells me something, I'm like 'Go away'. Until I read it myself, I don't believe anybody. My husband, he's always telling me, 'That's this, this, this', and then he picks up the Qur'an and he's like 'this' [acts out leafing through the book and pointing to a passage], and he explains everything to me.

This had not always been a preoccupation for Noreen. Her first marriage, to a cousin, was arranged by her parents and ended in divorce when her two children were still very small. By her own account, as a single mother in the 1990s she had lived a highly independent life.

I kind-of – not rebelled, but I was living on my own, I could do what I liked, no one to tell me I have to be home... I went out, even if I wanted to go out until 12 o'clock at night, come back four o'clock in the morning.

During this period of her life Noreen met her second husband, who was a recent immigrant from Pakistan. They cohabited for several years before having their *nikah*. Noreen described her second husband as the love of her life. She was therefore devastated when, after ten years, her marriage again ended in divorce and the second husband rapidly remarried.

Noreen's third marriage was again self-chosen and took place with very little family support. It was in this regard that she told me about what she had learnt from the advice literature about Islamic marriage. The book she showed me, *The marital life of Allah's messenger*, had been a reassuring lesson to her about the legitimacy of her decision to marry a third time – against the disapproval of her family – from an Islamic perspective:

[The book]'s all about the Prophet's wives, how he used to look after all of them and how he met them and how their lives were, I really enjoyed that book. When I read that I was like... I don't know... Gosh ... It seems so easy to be married in that culture, because really, in Islam, if your daughter is a widow, it's the parents' duty to get her married again. If she's divorced, it's the parents' duty to get her married again. But in our culture, it's just a culture thing, Pakistani and Indian; if you're divorced, that's it, your life's finished. But it's not supposed to be like that.

Sometimes I get into so many debates with them. Like my sister's daughter, she got married from Pakistan, and he comes here and within three weeks he showed his true colours and she got divorced within a month, that's it, gone. And I said, 'Do you know it's your duty to get her married? You're supposed to be looking for

someone. Say to her, “If you like someone, tell us,” because that’s also in Islam.’ Islam doesn’t say, ‘If you’re a Pakistani, you marry a Pakistani,’ which they do. My sister, she says, ‘Yep, not only does he have to be a Pakistani but he has to be the right caste, he has to be this’ and I was like, ‘Where do you get this from? You watch the Islamic TV channels all the time and you go on like the kids can’t watch East Enders [a popular UK television serial] and all that and you know, “You can’t do this and you can’t do that”, but you don’t actually look at it, that’s just the easy bit of it. The difficult part, you just push it aside.’ So I think this really helps me, and when you read what the Prophet, when he was getting married and whatever, and how people were looking at him, I think ‘It’s just our culture that does that.’

The book had given Noreen the confidence to confront her family over her third marriage:

Islamically I am quite proud that I got married and I just didn’t have boyfriends. And that’s what I say to anyone who like ... there are people that say, ‘Oh you got married three times!’ I remember my sister, she goes to me, ‘What number husband is this then?’

And the whole family was there, I don’t know whether it was Eid or a birthday party or whatever, she goes, ‘What number husband is this?’ I said, ‘For your information, it’s three!’ I said, ‘I haven’t done anything wrong.’ I said, ‘I’ve done a *nikah*, I’m not running around and having a boyfriend and sleeping in sin with him and doing all this and that.’ She goes, ‘No, no, no, I didn’t say it because of this,’ but I made sure her husband heard it, the brother-in-laws heard it, the sister-in-laws heard it, I made sure everybody heard it that day, because I am not ashamed of getting married three times because firstly, in Islam it says you’re allowed to do *nikah*, and secondly, I did it because I wanted to improve my life.

Like Rani, then, Noreen used the advice literature on marriage to open up possibilities for divorce and remarriage in the context of what she saw as patriarchal ‘cultural’ (Bolognani and Mellor 2012) expectations that women should persevere with even the unhappiest marriage, that divorce is a life-long stigma, and that remarriage is morally disreputable.

Concluding remarks

Why do women read these kinds of marriage manuals, and what might their reading practices tell us about how women engage with the Islamic tradition over the long-term of unhappy marriages, and about these questions of freedom and agency? My analysis of the three texts draws out the continuities with the prescriptive literature written by Muslim reformists in 19th

century India. Whilst detailing the conditions in which divorce is legally permissible, the emphasis is on the detested character of divorce, and whilst detailing the obligations of husbands in satisfying their wives and treating them well, the advice is given primarily to wives about the importance of exercising patience. Whilst we can only speculate about the motivations of those who republish and recirculate Part 4 of *Bahishti zewar*, the authors of the *Muslim marriage guide* and *Biwi ke haquq* offer their advice so as to stem the tide of divorce. It seems the three women readers use the literature in ways that diverge from the authors' stated intentions, taking the texts as benchmarks as to what a wife should expect from a husband and considering their infraction just cause for ending their marriages, or garnering chapter and verse to cite in front of their families – using the 'religion versus culture contrast' (Bolognani and Mellor 2012) – to convince them to support a woman-initiated *khula* divorce or a remarriage, rather than reversing the contemporary swell in marital breakdown. This would be in keeping with much of the anthropological and historical work on reading cultures, which has emphasized the agency of readers in controlling the meaning of books. But Reed's (2004) ethnography of the Henry Williamson Society suggests another way of analysing this material, one that follows where 'readers assign agency and how relations are thus drawn out' (p. 113, my emphasis). If we take seriously the claims of a reader 'who picks up a book and starts to read', she or he 'may perceive the action as his or her own but at the same time look forward to being *acted upon*' (*ibid.*, my emphasis again). We might then emphasize less the radical autonomy of readers, and more their inclination to pick the book up in the first place. Indeed, these three women readers turned to the Islamic literature on marriage because they considered its teachings to be authoritative and binding.

The women's routes through their marital difficulties shed light on, and allow me to reconsider my earlier arguments about the work of Saba Mahmood (2005) and her critics on the other side of the anthropological debate over 'everyday Islam'. If we take the book to be an index of the authority of the discursive tradition, and 'the everyday' to refer to the lay reader and her interpretations and uses, 'the everyday' again appears to be resistive, in contrast with the patient submission of the religious virtuoso. The women take from the texts the advice about the failings of their husbands and about the conditions in which they may divorce or remarry rather than advice about endlessly submitting to their husbands and exercising patience in pursuit of religious merit. But we now see with greater clarity that 'the everyday' is not a space outside of or opposed to the Islamic tradition. We appreciate how genuinely Naila, Rani and Noreen sought to locate their moves towards separation, divorce and remarriage within the Islamic model of marriage. They might not exercise patience unto

infinity, but their dilemmas take place *within* an Islamic frame. As Fadil and Fernando (2015) observe, this recalls the analysis of de Certeau (1984), who does not see the ‘poaching’ of texts by readers as separate from the ‘productive apparatus’ of discourse (p. xiv).

Fadil and Fernando (2015) are right to critique the assumption that ‘everyday’ practices are ‘moments of disruption, of *not conforming* to religious norms’ (p. 69). But returning to my earlier work, there is still some friction with Mahmood’s (2005) displacement of agency onto the plane of discourse. In this, she goes beyond Reed (2004), for example. For Mahmood, the action of the woman who picks up *Biwi ke haquq* or *The marital life of Allah’s messenger* – who looks forward to being acted upon by the authors – is excluded from the analysis. Mahmood is not interested in agency that would ‘belong to the women themselves’ (p. 32), and does not envision ‘the personal preferences and proclivities of the individual to be the object of study’ (p. 33). Her arguments take place on a different plane of analysis, at the level of the Islamic discursive tradition and the capacities for action that it creates. Yet Katherine Frank’s (2006) intervention is pertinent in reminding us that however useful Mahmood’s displacement of agency may be for thinking about different constructions of self, ‘there are still those of us who would like to understand exactly how these processes occur’ and who ‘do not wish to foreclose this other realm’ (p. 294). Frank argues, furthermore, that for all her disclaimers (‘I am not smuggling back in a subject-centred theory of agency’, Mahmood 2005, p.32), Mahmood’s ethnographic analysis still operates through the self:

who or what is ‘summoned’ in the above explanation? How does this ‘recognizing’ of ‘themselves’ take place?... we are still left with the same ghostly figure lurking in the background... the person negotiating these discourses... This figure has not been ‘smuggled’ back in, but, in fact, has never actually been banished successfully in the first place. It is not the ‘secular-liberal’ figure in complete control of his or her own destiny... but it is certainly a living human being. (Frank 2009, p. 294)

My material leaves me still grappling with this. I have discussed women turning to the advice literature, thinking about it and acting upon it – perhaps sometimes inverting its stated objectives – in relation to their own marital predicaments. The point is well taken that an analysis focused on instances of subversion ‘does not always capture the meanings of these practices, that is, what these practices “do” within the discursive context’ (Mahmood 2005, p. 175). For Naila, for example, the decision to separate from her husband when she read about the extent to which his conduct contradicted the Islamic model of marriage was no more agential than her self-cultivation in the mould of the dutiful wife who offers herself to her husband even when she is travelling by camel. But even if agency is not opposed to power, it

remains possible to analyse how agency is exercised by and through women, and not only by the discursive tradition. This is the approach suggested by de Certeau (1984), who shines such light on ‘the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of “discipline”’ (p. xiv-xv).

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