

Book review: Anna-Maria Walter: Intimate Connections - Love and Marriage in Pakistan's High Mountains

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only in the twentieth century. To take the Khalsa as the core of the Sikh *ethnie*, rather than the older Sikh tradition dating back to the birth of the religion in the fifteenth century, would involve a significant reworking of Smith's conception of the *ethnie* as a bridge between a pre-modern ethnic core and the modern nation. Without such a reworking and adaptation, the *ethnie*, far from being primordial, can be shown to be a modern construction teleologically invested with significance, or what Ozkirimli and Sofos in their critique of Smith's theory term "retrospective ethnicization" (*Tormented by History: Nationalism in Greece and Turkey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Another nominal issue with the application of the concept of the *ethnie* to the Sikh case relates to language and territory. The authors mistakenly, or perhaps inadvertently, attribute to Gurmukhi the status of a language, when in fact it is a script. Much of the Sikh scripture, and the majority of the Sikh canon, is written in the Braj-Awadhi dialect of what is known today as Hindi, using the Gurmukhi script. The Punjabi language as it is understood today appears conspicuously absent from Sikh religious and historical literature until the twentieth century, as do references to Punjab, its territory and its spatio-cultural geography.

Given the vast scope of the book, it is but natural that deviating into such tangents would be unfeasible – a limitation the authors acknowledge at the outset as the natural consequence of the convoluted and contested nature of Sikh and Punjabi history. Within the scope that the book sets out for itself, it emerges as an excellent resource, and would no doubt be indispensable to researchers, scholars and lay readers seeking to gain a deeper understanding of Sikh nationalism, from its inception to the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Kamalpreet Singh Gill

ANNA-MARIA WALTER, *Intimate Connections: Love and Marriage in Pakistan's High Mountains*. New Brunswick et al.: Rutgers University Press, 2022. 244 pages, 19 images, 5 tables, \$34.95. ISBN 978-1-9788-2048-7 (pb)

All over the world, love and relationships are two central themes of songs, poems, fairy tales, films and literary works. Love and affection are intrinsic to social interactions and human relationships and this is why every human being can relate to them in one form or another. Yet few people can put into words how love and affection are manifested in interactions and relationships. In her monograph *Intimate Connections: Love and Marriage in Pakistan's High Mountains*, Anna-Maria Walter provides glimpses of how love and intimacy evolve in heterosexual (pre-)marital relationships in Gilgit district. Gilgit city is the urban centre

in the sparsely populated territory Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), located in the Himalayan region in Pakistan's north, at the border with China and India. Through ethnographic fieldwork, Walter elucidates local manifestations and practices of intimacy and love. She shows how technological change, migration and rising levels of formal education have affected (pre-)marital relationships and how marriages are arranged. The book is structured well and the line of argumentation is clear and well-articulated. The book is of interest to those interested in the micro-transformation of social change, emotions and affects, and family structures and gender relations. Those interested in the impact of technology and migration on social relations might draw useful insights from the book as well.

Through her inquiry Walter provides a locally grounded account of love, intimacy and marriage. She seeks to add nuance to prevalent conceptions of "the oppressed Muslim woman" (p. 26) and of arranged marriages as forced and devoid of love. First, she shows that women take part in the negotiation of intimacy and marriages as co-producers. Second, she shows that love and affection have various manifestations. This becomes evident from the fact that in Urdu and Shina, the languages spoken by Walter's interlocutors, there are many synonyms for the English term love (*pyar, ishq, mohabbat, khush, pasand*), each with its own connotation.

Following Sarah Ahmed (2014) and Francois Laplantine (2015), Walter adopts "the cultural politics of the sensible" (p. 10) as her approach to understanding how human beings, through continuous interactions, co-produce meaning. Emotions are embodied knowledge that enable human beings to relate to the world, hence they are not confined to a separate sphere. Moreover, like Anthony Giddens's structuration theory, Walter's argument is premised on the assumption that human activities and experiences are enabled and constrained by structures; at the same time, humans have agency and can modulate their behaviour to change structures. As she rightly points out, it is not easy to practice this approach, because it is difficult for individuals to articulate emotions and their experiences are contextually grounded.

Walter had to pay attention to repertoires of being and emotions that she was not familiar with and attuned to. As she explains with reference to Bourdieu, to understand transformations of habitus, she had to get a "feel for the game" (Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, p. 66). To do so, Walter adopted "emphatic fieldwork" (p. 23) as a methodology to pay attention to emotions, accepting them for what they are, rather than inquiring into their facticity. Moreover, she approaches marriage and love via intimacy, which is more tangible. Each chapter of the book focuses on different relationship dynamics and permutations of love and intimacy. She demonstrates that central factors that have affected all these relationships are the availability and use of mobile phones, the spread of formal education, migration and increasing levels of geographical mobility, as well as wider access to the

media. Her study is important because the inquiry into everyday life shows that practices connected to love and intimacy are subject to (micro)change. Her observations thereby complicate existing discussions that invoke the impression of codes of honour and modesty that, as traditions, are set in stone.

The book is a deep dive into the micro-transformations that have been taking place in personal relationships and social interactions in the past decade. Many studies on social change in Pakistan pay little attention to these changes, most probably because they are profoundly personal and hence difficult to observe. Between 2011 and 2015, Walter spent 14 months in Gilgit district, which encompasses the administrative capital of the territory Gilgit-Baltistan, where she lived with various families. She also stayed in touch with the families by mobile phone. The study is grounded in participant observation in family settings, which appear to be primarily with the women of the household, and in interviews with men and women.

Walter lived with five families and shares deeply personal, and hence sensitive, information about these families (pp. 22–23). This is why she has anonymised the material by changing names and providing only broad markers of identification. A broader reflection on the (local) ethical implications of the research and other ethical dilemmas is not provided but would be of interest. A white foreigner living with a family in Gilgit is probably not a common occurrence. Hence, the question arises as to whether the families might be easily identifiable for people who live in the area.

Walter develops the following central argument throughout the book: women perform and embody *sharm*, which encompasses modesty, shame, respectability and reserve, to demonstrate their self-control as a way to maintain agency (p. 103). What she means by this is that women are generally seen by the prevailing patriarchal culture in Pakistan as weak and soft because they are emotional and overcome by the ego (*nafs*). In contrast, men are constructed as guided by rationality (*aql*) and hence in control of their senses and strong. This is one of the reasons why men need to guard and control women. By performing *sharm*, i.e. self-control, women seek to counteract these general stereotypes. Having and performing *sharm* is central for women to maintain respectability and reputation, both their own and that of their families.

Many other studies frame these practices in the context of honour (*izzat* and *ghairat*), which are generally focused on men as the “guardians” of honour. Walter’s elaborations are therefore very interesting because she provides an alternative, women-centred perspective (chapter 2). Even though it is socially expected of couples to guard emotions, Walter shows in chapter 3 how affection and attachment (*mohabbat*) between spouses of arranged marriages develop within the family setting. In chapter 4, Walter examines behaviours that seem contradictory in the eyes of the outsider: while women practice reserve to maintain agency and to avoid overstepping social norms, men can engage in outbursts

of emotions because they are otherwise seen as in control of their emotions. There are many stories of men who are “possessed” by “mad” and passionate love (*ishq*) that robs them of willpower, but in contrast to women, most men can be “overcome” by these emotions without negative repercussions. By contrasting how *ishq* plays out differently for men and women, Walter puts her finger on contradictory practices that demonstrate the permeation of patriarchy throughout social structures. Walter connects her discussion primarily to Islam. Patriarchy as a structural feature hardly figures in her analysis, even though in my reading her study also exposes the inner workings of patriarchy, which is very valuable.

The second central argument of the book is that a “democratisation of marriage” (p. 19, 140ff) has taken place. Walter argues that expectations as well as practices of marriage have transformed from utilitarian and functional arrangements within the family setting to more companionate arrangements where the focus has shifted to the wellbeing of the couple and where both partners shape the relationship and enact intimacy. For one, she observes a change in the arrangement and initial stages of marriage. In earlier times, couples were not supposed to be in touch during the liminal phase between *nikkah* – the signing of the marriage contract in accordance with principles of Islam – and *shadi*, the ceremony where the bride leaves her family’s home to move to her husband. This phase has been re-coded as a period of religiously sanctioned dating, which couples have claimed for themselves. Hence, what has changed is that primacy is given to the religious ceremony as the event that sanctions interactions between husband and wife, rather than the cultural practice.

Another change Walter observed is that both partners actively seek a companion rather than a contractual partner. These *pasand ki shadi*, often translated as “arranged love marriage”, thus differ from “traditional” arranged marriages, which focus on the social and family setting as the primary determinant (chapter 5). Both arguments are thought-provoking and encourage the drawing of parallels to other contexts, particularly in South Asia.

While reading, I repeatedly wondered what the findings tell us on a larger scale and which section of society in Gilgit-Baltistan they apply to. The first chapter provides an overview of the area. Walter provides comparatively brief descriptions and characterisations of the families she lived with. Basic information about the socio-economic background or educational level are mentioned, but for readers the context remains rather fuzzy. While it might have been a conscious (ethical) choice to present only basic information about the families, it eludes the reader’s understanding. It appears that Walter lived mostly with urban families whose members had some formal education and comparatively well-paid jobs. Since Walter refers to several authors who have worked on the urban middle class in India and Pakistan, it appears that she also considers her interlocutors to be part of this segment of society, even

though it is not explicitly mentioned. Ethnographies cannot claim to be generalisable or representative due to their detail and depth; mentioning and describing the context and limitations of a study is important to enable readers to evaluate the arguments and findings and compare the results to other case studies and ethnographies.

The author mentions harassment and domestic violence as side notes in the text. Considering that the book is about (pre-)marital relations, this omission seems rather odd. While it is entirely possible that she (luckily) did not witness violence and trauma, and her study is not about this topic, the prevalence of violence and harassment in Pakistan is a well-established fact. Walter refers to very low reported domestic violence rates in GB to justify her choice (p. 82). To substantiate this claim, she cites data from a book by Anita Weiss, who took the evidence from a 2012 Pew Research Global Attitudes Project (cf. Anita Weiss, *Interpreting Islam, Modernity, and Women's Rights in Pakistan*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). In contrast, a report by the National Institute of Population Studies shows that reported domestic violence is as prevalent in GB as in other provinces of Pakistan, based on official police statistics from 2017 and 2018.¹

In fact, GB is often left out of statistics because of its vague constitutional status as a territory rather than a province of Pakistan. Walter appears to count only physical violence as domestic violence, disregarding emotional or financial violence. Several studies have shown that domestic violence is normalised, and therefore invisible, in Pakistan to such an extent that it makes mapping its prevalence quite difficult.² For me, a quote from one of Walter's interlocutors precisely evidences this normalisation: the woman says that the husband's "neglect [of the wife] is more hurtful than rage" (p. 83). Walter explains that women prefer their husbands' emotional outbursts, even if they are negative, to indifference, which is seen as a woman's "failure to win him over". On another occasion, Walter quotes a male interlocutor who mentions that he would commit an honour killing if his sister was caught having an affair (pp. 62–63). While she mentions her bewilderment, there is no further discussion of the problematic nature of these quotes. Given that domestic violence and abuse are part of everyday life for a large number of persons in Pakistan, at least a brief reflection would have been desirable.

1 National Institute of Population Studies / ICF: Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017–18, Islamabad / Rockville, 2019, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR354/FR354.pdf> (accessed 16 May 2022); see also Muhammad Imran / Rehana Yasmeen: Prevalence of Physical, Sexual and Emotional Violence among Married Women in Pakistan: A Detailed Analysis from Pakistan Demographic Health Survey 2017–18, *International Journal on Women Empowerment* 6, 2020, pp. 1–9; and Parveen Azam Ali / Paul B. Naylor / Elizabeth Croot / Alicia O'Cathain: Intimate Partner Violence in Pakistan: A Systematic Review. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse* 16(3), 2015, pp. 299–315.

2 See The World Bank: UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2016–2017 (Gilgit-Baltistan), 2016, <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/4140> (accessed 16 May 2022); Sobia Haqqi / Abdul Faizi: Prevalence of Domestic Violence and Associated Depression in Married Women at a Tertiary Care Hospital in Karachi. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 5, 2010, pp. 1090–1097.

Walter argues that a “democratization of the interpersonal domain that sees intimate relationships characterized by negotiated, fair, and equal rights and obligations, based on trust instead of control” (p. 168) has taken place. I kept wondering to which section of Pakistan’s population this finding applies, given that financial decision-making, division of domestic labour or work outside the house, domestic violence and family planning are not discussed in the study. These aspects would also be important aspects if we talk about democratisation of marriages. A characterisation of the sample would have been helpful to evaluate the reach of this finding.

Nevertheless, the book provides excellent and intimate insights into everyday practices and ambiguities of marriage, a central institution that structures social interactions in Pakistan and is therefore very insightful in understanding social changes. The sections on the role of mobile phones in establishing intimacy between couples were very engaging, and it would be interesting to know how the advent of smartphones and mobile internet packages has further impacted the changes. It is evident that Anna-Maria Walter has much more information on the effects of technological change on intimate relationships and it would be a pleasure to read more about this in the future.

Sarah Holz